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UNION CHAPEL
By CLARENCE E. HATFIELD

1742



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The Echo of Union Chapel

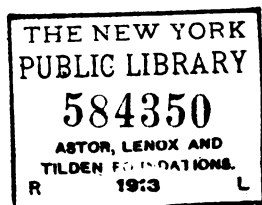
A TALE OF THE OZARK LOW HILL
COUNTRY

By

CLARENCE E. HATFIELD



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WOMAN
CLUB
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WHAT IS YOUR LIFE?

AN INTRODUCTION.

*"For what is your life? It is even a vapor,
that appeareth for a little time, and then van-
isheth away."*

JAMES, iv., 14.

This story of mine is old, as men are old. Old, yet never quite through the telling. Generations yet unborn will begin the tale where others laid it down. Along the narrow way which, Jim Brown says, "Grows broader unto eternal life," men and women are pleading for help. Help in order they may walk true.

Jim says: "The broad way grows narrower unto destruction," and all its course, more especially where the way grows crowded, souls are ever watching for a friendly hand—a hand that often fails them.

In this way, which seemeth right unto man, near the end where death lurks, sign-fingers, plainly pointing the way back, are on every side. The press behind, and urging ahead, holds as manacles the half-willing soul.

In many instances the hearty cries from both roads fall on unhearing ears in the churches. What a help it can be when men hear, only the redeemed can say.

Jim Brown, then a young man, drove his team of oxen over unmarked way to the banks of Honey Creek. The smoke of war had barely risen from the hills.

One shovelful of fire was a great help then. Few could do even this for another.

Years went their way, and need of borrowed fire went with them. Other needs followed in the wake of time, with just as few able to help. People brought to the new country their Bible, in heart and hand, only to find the contest with grinding toil, in field and cabin, blurred the teaching.

Unaided, men fought through the years, dying, the unequal battle against them. Shepherds roamed the hills then, warning of a hell to come, unseeing and unheeding the hell now. Small wonder religious zeal expended its force in camp-meeting revival, leaving the long months of groans and sighs a whitened heap of soul skeletons.

A far cry it is, from Union Chapel to Blender; yet one need not think it strange, nor a new thing. Life touches life in a manner unaccountable to us; simply because we do not look.

Soul-life need of men is alike, far and near; and every man's a preacher. There is nothing to hinder us from laying down to pleasant dreams and forgetting; nothing but the pleading voice of God, and that don't count.

Life as a vapor does not accord altogether with human view of existence. No matter; the fact remains: when the vapor of morning lifts toward Heaven a pleasant day is promised. Toward the earth hours are bereft of cheer, and lowering.

As Casper Dwight, in the shadow of his old cabin, men have stood ~~are still standing~~; dreams of fond things shattered. Those who have no need are never found crying by the way. : Thankful we should be, at Blender, or wherever else our self-centered lives are lived, to hear, as Israel once heard, our Lord question: "Seemeth it a small thing unto you to have eaten up the good pasture, but ye must tread down with your feet the residue of your pastures? And to have drunk of the deep waters, but ye must foul the residue with your feet?"

BOSTON, October 9, 1911.

To the editors and all others who do me the kindness to read the within MS.:

As a matter of information only, it gives me pleasure to be able to say, every incident of importance in this story is a matter of actual occurrence. This is true of Joe Munson, who in turn contracted Blackleg, Lump-jaw and at last died of Glanders; all, alas, because he knew no better, and there was no one who cared to teach him. I speak of Joe because it would strike one as fiction only if the proof were not at hand.

The splendid Blender Church is growing better and more useful every day, and Rev. Ralph Glenwood remains the pastor. What has been accomplished, as set out in this work of fiction founded on fact, can be and will be accomplished in thousands of places in years to come.

Yours most truly,

CLARENCE E. HATFIELD.

Jim Brown says: Texas is a big state, but parts of it has one great draw-back; the only difference you can see between the ground and sky is the ground has buffalo grass on it.

Stone County is different; if she was properly squashed out she would make a dozen like Texas, except you can tell mighty easy where the sky begins. An' when you do see it, it takes a powerful mean man to keep from cryin', 'specially when the moon shines soft over the hills, an' the birds of the night sing. Why, dog-gone it, I was here twelve years before I got all the snuffle out of my system, an' there be times yet when I just can't help but feel sad—such a marvelous sadness. When it is all over you have a lingerin' hankerin' for more of the same.

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The Echo of Union Chapel

CHAPTER I

UNION CHAPEL

"No, Walph, me fink me put it on."

"You don't know where the feathers are, and I do; besides, I am the oldest—it is my place to put it on. Let's go to the old house."

Ralph Glenwood, age seven, and his brother Harry, soon to be four, near the close of a Midsummer day, standing in the shade of the sheepshed on their father's Iowa farm, were having the conversation as we read it.

High above the heads of the children, on a shelf attached to the end of the shed, was the usual resting place for a can of black coaltar—a useful remedy, on occasions, for injuries to live stock. A long step-ladder, reclining against the shed end bore testimony of the manner by which the can of tar is now in possession of the oldest boy.

Three days before, the quiet country homes had been stirred as they seldom ever were by the news industriously spread by neighbor John Payne, as he drew his horse up alongside the road, long enough to tell the story, then on to tell still others.

During the night a tramp, homeless, friendless—a man without family and without a God, as in the wretchedness of his heart he sometimes muttered to himself—had opened the door of Union Chapel and

prepared his couch in one of the many pews. The preparation involved no labor save the folding of his ragged coat to serve as a pillow.

Union Chapel was, as the first half of its name implies, a union affair—not a man, woman or child in the entire neighborhood, for many miles, but had given to the fund for its erection. As a church building it was a success. Even its enemies, if it had any, could not deny that. On the occasional Sundays when a traveling preacher would occupy the pulpit, the great bell in the stately tower would ring out the announcement, for all the world as though it were an every-Sunday occurrence. At such times the fathers in their farm yards, mothers in their kitchens and children at play would be quiet long enough to listen, and as the last vibration of sweet sound left the ears, heave a sigh of thankfulness for such a bell—for such a building.

Contractor Silsby, who had charge of the erection when Union Chapel was built, fifteen years since, a man of years and a first-class brick mason—if he did say it himself—around the dinner pails at noontime said time and again, "A fine house, but the Winter will never be long enough, or the Summer short enough, to see an organization use that building."

Fifteen years of time served to prove the old man's forecast. For a while a thriving Sunday school was carried on. It quit between daylight and dark one Sabbath day. Some one said the Methodists were about to get it. Another attempt was ended, as some one else said, because the Baptists had designs on it. That was the last.

No community in the world could show more different classification of religious belief, and so few of any one kind. Of late the bell rang seldom—owls in the tower and yellowjackets under the hitching posts were left to do as they cared to do.

The constituency of Union Chapel worshipped from afar, and on Saturday in the less busy season, as they passed by on their way to the county-seat, for trading purposes, the admiration was shown at close quarters.

A steady, growing stream of sturdy farmer folk, still enlarging as Payne rode onward, flowed into the yard of Union Chapel. Those in advance discovered the surprised object of their wrath seated on a stone behind the house, eating from a generous loaf of bread lying on another stone beside him. The bread was a gift from the Glenwood home, but not from the head of it. The look of disappointment, of pallor, that spread over the face of the tramp, and the tears that started in his eyes, as Mr. Glenwood said no, reached the heart of the wife.

Just beyond the front gate of the farm lawn Ralph overtook the stranger and delivered into his ready hands the bread.

"If—if there is a God, may He bless you, my lad!" It seemed to the boy the man would have said more; he gasped—words would not come. For a moment the free hand rested over the heart, then turning swiftly, the first tramp the boy had ever seen passed out of sight down a turn of the road.

A few moments later the mother in the house was asked, "Why do men have to beg?"

"I can't tell you now, son; you will know some time."

"But why?"

"You wouldn't understand if I told you. Run on out and play."

"That man had a blue something on his arm, up under his shirt; looked like a fish. What was it? I saw it when his hand was lifted, through a hole in his shirt."

"Run out now, and play."

For some time the tramp and the farmers, the one

still sitting and the others standing, contemplated one another. The stranger was the first to find his voice and spoke a "Good morning!"

"What are you doing here?" came in a volley from the citizens.

"Eating breakfast—if it is any of your business."

Jay Browning, who had twenty dollars in money and two days' hauling invested in Union Chapel, considered himself entitled to speak.

"We'll make it some of our business. What were you doing in the Chapel?"

"Having one of the best sleeps I've had in three weeks. For a good sleep, give me a church house every time. The difference betwixt me and you, I sleep at night and you on Sunday."

This was a guess, of course, but the guess landed so plump on facts that all present laughed. The effect on Browning was wonderful; his face turned from white to purple and back to white, an attempt to say something ending in a deep gurgle of the throat. His next move was off down the road toward his home, in a swinging stride; long strides for so short a man.

For a long time an awkward silence reigned, broken at last by the tramp.

"Well, what you going to do about me using your house for a tavern?"

"You talk, Jake." Several of the crowd gathered about spoke.

Jake Patton, noted for his ability to talk—as the late planting of his corn often testified, cleared his throat and began: "Stranger, this is a serious piece of business. That house"—with an impressive wave of the hand in the general direction of the building—"was built to worship in. Here you come and go in at night. It's outrageous! It's preposterous!" While Jake was getting his breath the tramp broke in.

"I had a home one day; just how I lost it is too long

a story. I suppose in my time I was just such a fool as you fellows are now. It seems to me a man can worship God in honest sleep much better than in thieving wakefulness." A gasp from the assembled neighborhood. "Wouldn't it be better to do something worth while, to help somebody, than simply to be glad for a house? If there is a God, He can't use such fellows as you."

"Give him some of this, boys!" The voice came from the edge of the circle, and was that of Browning. His reason for going home was now apparent, as he swung into sight a bucket of tar.

The suggestion met with a cheer. The tramp was powerless in the hands of the mob. In thirty minutes, or less time, he was sent off into the brush, covered from head to heel with tar, and too angry for words.

Around the well-laden tables at dinner that day the families learned all about the events of the morning. The head of the Glenwood household probably expressed the feeling of all concerned, except the tramp, when he said: "It would have been more fun if we had thought to get feathers."

Ralph Glenwood was the only one of that community to see the tramp again. While on his regular trip to bring the cows to the milk lot the evening of the succeeding day, he stumbled over the feet of a man concealed in the hazel brush. The man sat up; it was the tramp. The recognition was mutual. The only conversation had was the tramp's request for another loaf of bread, and the boy's favorable answer, as he turned about and went back to get it.

Providence was kind to both tramp and boy. The former received the bread, and strange, it was never missed.

"I will get even some day for this business, boy; I will get even. Thank you." The sleeveless arm reached out to take the loaf was trembling.

When the new dwelling was built on the Glenwood farm the old one was moved back on the lot, made a storeroom for all sorts of odds and ends, and named as it really was, the "old house." It was toward the old house that Ralph led his brother, and inside it, all clothing removed, that he applied the tar. A sack of feathers, dragged down from a peg, completed the play. When he was a man, Ralph said they used lard and a hickory stick to get the tar off. The lard they used on him—the stick on me.

In the stillness of that night a boy's sleep was disturbed by dreams of oceans of tar, great loads of feathers, and a large man with a blue fish on his arm.

CHAPTER II

I WILL

Snow—just snow! So far as the eye could see, snow covered field and hill.

Rail fences, which marked the boundaries of fields, could be located only by the great drifts of frozen snow. The roads, packed hard, lay out in long, dark stretches, much like rivers, all running into a main body wherever there happened to be a crossroad. It was along such roads and skimming along the top of such drifts, that Ralph made his way to the brick school house during his seventh Winter.

Through all time the revelation of knowledge has caused the eyes of boyhood to open wide, but never one who responded more promptly than this one.

The chief ambition, or dream, perhaps, of the boy at the beginning of that Winter was to own a circus. Before the first of January that was all given up, and a desire to be a General took its place. By the time Spring opened the boy confided to his mother that if he could help people to know things, as his teacher did, he would be happy.

"Mr. Miesner has the true knack of a man and teacher," remarked John Shaffer, president of the Board of School Directors, at their regular Spring meeting that year.

"Yes," agreed the secretary. "I would say he is more than a teacher; he is a director of ambition, and if there is no ambition, he creates one."

This, when understood, explains why Jim Todd, who desired to be a cowboy, or a pirate, under the direction of his teacher determined to become a preacher—and did. It explains, too, why Ralph, but

a child in years, sat for hours thinking of the days out yonder when he might do things of service to people.

Friends of Miss Julia Delane, in her girlhood home in Tennessee, had often said she would be a failure as a home-maker. They were mistaken.

Mrs. Julia Glenwood loved her home, and the great love of her heart went out to her children. Never robust in health, the transition from her Southern home to that of her husband, Franklin Glenwood, in the more rigid climate of the North, did not add to her strength. In addition came the cares of a farm home, entirely unused to; then the boys—she often said they were no trouble, but multiplied steps proved they were.

As Spring came on her friends knew—that which the husband had known for many months—Mrs. Glenwood could never see her sons grown to manhood.

One afternoon, soon after school had closed, from his play in the orchard Ralph came to his mother where she sat in an easy chair under the spreading branches of a splendid walnut tree, his hands laden with blossoms.

"Are they not sweet, mama?" he asked, laying them on the arm of the chair.

"Yes, dear." She smiled, as one by one she took them up, placing them in a neat bouquet. "Flowers are sweeter here;" she paused a moment as in thought, then resumed, "sweeter than in the South. After the long, long Winter they come on so soon, and it seems so good to have them."

"Don't you like the Winter, mama?" wondering many things as he asked.

"Yes, I like the Winter, sometimes, but Summer I like always. In the Summer God's love is ever easy to see and understand, while in Winter we must look in our lives to see and know." More to herself than to the boy she continued, "Some lives have more of

Winter than of Summer, and never see and know, because they will not."

The boy was startled by a feeling he little knew how to define, and for long years afterward could not describe, as his mother drew him close to her and went on speaking.

"My boy, I may not be able to help you when the time comes, yet some day our Heavenly Father will call you to service. Don't refuse to listen. Once you have heard, never give up the service, no matter how great the price appears to be. Your service call will come, perhaps not as it came to me, or as it has come to others, but come it will. Promise me, as far as you understand, when the summons comes to do your part you will do it."

Trembling, he knew not why, the boy's lips answered, "I will, mama."

In the heart, still more difficult to tell the reason why, there seemed to echo: "I will!"

Long after the child had returned to his play the woman debated in her mind how much or how little he had understood. At the play, in which he seemed engrossed, the boy puzzled over thoughts, a vague shadow of which he seemed to remember out of his experience in school.

At bedtime, when good-night was said, tears were in the eyes of both mother and child. No questions were asked; both felt they knew.

Outside, the great spirit of the night enveloped a splendid walnut tree, under whose branches lay a halLOWed spot of earth, starbeam-kissed and dew-besparkled.

CHAPTER III

THE RETURN FROM CALVARY

"I wants to eat my dinna; gone taked table 'way from Harry!"

Stirring events were taking place in and around the Glenwood home. The family, with the exception of Mrs. Glenwood, now for some weeks past confined to her bed, were sitting down to the noonday meal, when the roof of the house was discovered to be burning. The first, and about the only piece of furniture carried out, was the table; hence the complaint Harry made and continued to make, until some one put him and his chair at the table out in the yard. He had some curiosity about the fire, but Nero had no more composure as he fiddled for burning Rome than the child displayed.

Grandpa Glenwood, whose chief delight was in the fact, self-stated, that to get excited under any circumstances was a crime akin to high treason; a crime of which he could not possibly bring himself to be guilty, was just as busy as Harry, only in a different manner.

At the first alarm of fire he rushed to an upstairs room, threw a very pretty and expensive lamp into the yard below from an open window, breaking it into a thousand or so pieces, then came downstairs drawing after him a tick full of straw he had caught up from the bed, and it on fire.

Iowa farmers are thankful the wind seldom blows hard in Summer. Had this day not been so grave an exception, the destruction of the home and contents could not have been so quickly done, nor so complete. Less than one half hour elapsed between the first sight of fire and the falling of the walls.

To a vacant house on an adjoining farm the family betook themselves, bothered but little with household effects for the time being.

Necessary articles, including a bed for Mrs. Glenwood, were quickly furnished by neighbors.

An anxious night was spent in the new home on the part of the husband. The children did not know of its seriousness. The shock of the fire and attendant excitement, to one in her enfeebled condition, left Mrs. Glenwood in a much worse condition than she had been. The family physician shook his head gravely as he reviewed her case. The counsel he gave on leaving was far from hopeful.

The few immediate days were long and lonesome ones to Ralph. Because they supposed him too young to understand he was told but little of the slowly slipping away of his mother. But he did understand. The moments he was permitted to be by her side were laden with sweetness to his soul, never to lose its holy influence.

Avoiding the shade of the walnut tree always in these days, he sought the restful presence of still other trees. Sometimes he wept—sometimes he smiled—at other times prayed.

As simple and trustful as with his father in flesh went out his supplication:

"Oh, Father, help me to understand. Help me to be and do as mama would have me."

It was the only prayer his heart knew, and his lips could frame no other.

In after years it was not the memory of her last good-by that remained. He felt at the time her kiss, though for his tears he could not see her face. Time effaced that memory. The thing that remained was only an echo—an echo in the heart of the spoken word from the lips.

"I will."

People were kind that day the beloved body was borne to its resting place in the pretty, quiet cemetery at Mount Zion. Of the soothing, kind words spoken by the minister—soothing to older people—Ralph heard and retained but one sentence.

"Every good influence that can be used is constantly being used; mother's memory, father's prayers, God's desire; all used to have us do Christ like service while we live."

The listening boy, dry-eyed now, caught that sentence, possibly with greater force than the men and women around him. Along with other living things in the heart of the growing boy, that grew as he grew, and grew to great results, were those words.

The road home was a sad one. Years went their course before he understood in any considerable measure the meaning of "the return from Calvary," yet every mile of the road home lingered in memory for life.

The fire left but few effects of the home to serve as reminders of her. But little need for impression on physical sense to one whose every energy of imperishable life within had been set on fire of motion.

Day by day progress was made on the new home erected on the foundation of the old. Little was said of his sorrow by Franklin Glenwood; apparently little thought was given it during the hard labor of the day. Few evenings there were when the evening shadows went out toward the horizon, that stalwart workmen on the walls did not draw grimy hands across tear-irritated eyes and swallow hard, as down the long avenue of cedars went the three—hands of children firm clasped in father's hand.

CHAPTER IV

ROCK RIVER ASSOCIATION

Mrs. Samantha Tartar loved to talk. Not that she knew matters of importance to talk about, but just because. Running out of something to say, which on occasions did happen, she was as certain to ask questions as they were uncertain of any intelligent answer.

"As prone to err, as sparks are to fly up'ard," Deacon Tartar had said somewhere in every public prayer he had prayed in thirty years, and the general opinion of people was the remark had direct reference to his wife.

The second day of Rock River Association was well advanced. The splendid dinner spread on great tables under the shady elms, on the farm of Rev. Jeremiah Woods was now but a satisfaction that lingers. Knots of men here and there were grouped on the rail fence surrounding the yard or sprawling in contentment on the grass. Groups of women, as yet around the tables, brushing now and then imaginary crumbs from the snow-white cloth, went merrily on with the annual visit.

For more than forty years Rock River Association had been the event in church life looked forward to and planned for by every soul in at least one county and parts of others. The home of some brother possessed of a large barn for the sleeping quarters of the men; a fair house to serve the same purpose for the women, and plenty of shade to protect from the August sun, was the meeting place.

Some time every year, generally when the best possible audience was gathered about, Deacon Tartar

would rid his outward organs of speech of the burden of amber they habitually carried, and with a wink, described as "fetching," remark: "We consider it too much of a strain on Union Chapel to use it; an', besides, hoot-owls are blame poor company at night an' yellowjackets pesky little comfort in the daytime."

Many now gathered in the group around the deacon were listening to this information for the tenth time, several more than that. On the fringe of the circle was one, the ears of whom were now tingling with their first hearing. During his seventeen years Ralph Glenwood had attended Rock River Association many times, but had been too busy, watering and feeding horses, to hear much of Deacon Tartar. This work had now fallen to other and younger boys. In a certain little book at home in which Ralph sometimes set down his impressions, in a sprawling boyish hand, stood the line:

"When I grow up I will take care of my own horses if I am able."

The laughter had scarcely died away, following the cracking of the Deacon's annual joke, when the circle was rudely parted and the ample form of Samantha Tartar made its way inside. Certain muscular movements around the mouth intimated she had something to say. It was only a question. Facing the Rev. Jeremiah, she propounded it.

"Brother Woods, where 'bouts in Scripture do you find that passage, 'Fret not thy gizzard'?"

It was plain the preacher was puzzled; however, he made a bold attempt to appear certain, and answered: "It's—it's in Proverbs; I forget the chapter."

"Proverbs? Nothing!" snorted the Deacon. "Ought to be ashamed of yourself. You a preacher, an' don't know that air text is in the Psalms!"

The attempt of Jeremiah to look meek and humble was a failure. Cracking his broad fists together and

addressing himself directly to the fuming Deacon, he said: "Deacon, I don't deny the office of deacon is useful, but never intended to be used to tear down those above. I won't talk with you when you are mad. Go soak your head!"

"Just listen!" the Deacon fairly exploded. Glaring from one to another, then back to the preacher, he continued: "Soak my head, is it? If it was as thick as some, I would, I vow! You insulted Samantha, insulted me; now you'll take a lickin'!"

"I didn't insult anybody or anything, but for the glory of the gospel, I never seen a deacon yet I couldn't lick with both of my feet fast in a peck measure!"

The faces of both preacher and deacon were less than six inches apart. Most of the bystanders said it was an accident; that when Deacon Tartar again tried to speak he only spit in the preacher's left eye. Those who looked on were equally unanimous in opinion that the preacher's right fist bumped the Deacon's nose a most resounding whack. Ten minutes or more of tangled legs and arms ensued, no one thinking to note time or caring, apparently, to interfere. During the while Samantha enlivened the occasion by chasing round and round a tree, screaming intermittently; finally sinking down in a heap, covering her eyes with her hands to shut out the scandalizing sight.

Once on their feet again, the belligerent parties made off in opposite directions. The battle was over.

Some few saw the preacher and the Deacon meet below the barn that evening and shake hands.

"I forgive you, Deacon," the preacher said.

"An' I forgive you, Brother Woods." The Deacon smiled and continued: "I have knowed all along that no one man has all the truth. One man has half an' another has half."

Brother Woods was smiling, too, as he said: "Specially in ligion."

"Specially in religion." The echo came from the Deacon.

As the two men walked away, arm in arm, a boy arose from the ground across the rail fence. A half-dozen days later he wrote in a little book, among other things:

"Some men who think they have one-half of the truth about things religious have no part of the truth."

The outdoor arbor, where services were held on the Woods' farm, was a long-remembered spot to Ralph. Never had he felt so much interest in the services, in part explained by the fact that he now had more opportunity to see and hear. To any one, and to a boy above all others, the upper side of a hard board, without a support to the back, is not an inviting place for long tarrying. Sometimes the sermons were lifeless, and songs hardly less so. At such times the deep meditations of the boy's soul, reinforced by the liberal use of a Barlow knife, prevented his noticing the seats.

On Thursday night the minister who arose to speak was a stranger. Not over fifty years of age, yet he had the appearance of an old man. As he looked on the face of the stranger, Ralph knew intuitively that he was beholding the countenance belonging to a true servant of God. In his cozy bed in the barn loft, late in the night, the heart of the boy continually felt it had known a burden bearer.

The stranger spoke for an hour. His sermon was a call to service, but few heard the call. It was to most a call to rejoicing—gladness that me and mine are safe.

"What is your life?" Ralph tried to answer as the speaker continued. "It is even a vapor, that appeareth for a little time and then vanisheth away."

A splendid sermon it was, so all said. Ralph knew it was a great sermon. What the words were he could not recall, but he knew that in them and about them

was a certain something which stirred his boyish heart to its very depths.

At the close of the sermon there was a demonstration of overflowing hearts such as the boy had never witnessed. Strong men sang, prayed and laughed in turn. Women wept and shouted to those around them from the flood of emotion let loose from bondage. Into the very sawdust on the ground many fell prostrate.

"I can't shout, but what I say is, them as can shout an' wants to shout, let 'em shout!" A woman who throughout the sermon had sat beside Ralph was the speaker. Her long, dark tresses of hair loose, dangling down her back, lips parted in what struck the wondering boy as a saintly smile, while from her eyes shone a light of such unutterable happiness. It was a picture. Back and forth on the now deserted seat the light tread of her feet had little suggestion of the long, weary years of toil she had endured.

Her portion had been but a share of that which dominated the lives of all others there present, and others out in the broad world around them. It was different now. Moments of time, in the which are crowded the only really pleasant recollection of a year.

Something told the unnoticed boy the great Eternal Director of human life loves to please His children. It was only a guess, that thought of his; because such moments of exquisite joy seldom come to man is because man will not often listen for the call of the Master. A guess at the time; a reality in after life.

From a long tramp over field and meadow alone the boy returned to his couch in the loft of the old barn, to find all others asleep. Noiselessly he made his way up the ladder and across the hay. Usually it was not a difficult matter for Ralph to sleep. Try as he would it was an impossibility now. Finally across the expanse of hay there came a snore. A deep, prolonged,

agonizing snore. To the wide-awake boy it seemed the man certainly had killed himself by the sheer force of the effort. But again it came. Up from the hay came a hundred forms. "It's Brother Brown, from Texas." One of the forms volunteered the information.

"Hey, there!" another form shouted, as a boot struck the wall at the head of the disturber of dreams. "That's a great noise for a stranger to be making!" Noise ceased and one by one the dark forms returned from whence they came.

"Some men are more of a disturbance than a help, always." This remark from the last form to retire brought only a response of grunts. It was the voice of the speaker of the evening.

All unintended, that remark fell upon the heart of the boy as a knell of condemnation. Pressing back a sob that welled up in his breast, he groped his way back to the ladder and fell, rather than climbed down. Regaining his feet, he ran as one in a race to the altar of the meeting-place. Prone on his face in the dust of the ground, he sobbed and muttered prayer.

"I will! I will! I will!" over and over he repeated the promise.

"It is over, Father; I am thine for service."

The sob that accompanied was one of joy.

Bareheaded as he stood, the bright rays of a silvery moon kissed with baptism the morning breeze fanned hair of the lad and sent a glow of tingling warmth deep into the soul. Shouts of joy crowded to the lips and startled the stillness of the coming dawn. Sleepers in the barn tossed uneasily, and half-wakened minds wondered what it meant. On the morrow they knew. Back in his meadow-scented bed a short season of sleep came to Ralph before the noise of a new day called to activity. Peopled with the past the sleep was, and perhaps the future. Mother, Mr. Miesner, Dea-

con Tartar, and other more vague forms were there. Apart from them, yet as one of them, the form of a girl, nothing of her remembered save the presence, and even the presence elusively beyond him.

Over them all the spread of a walnut tree, the very branches of which bore a thousand friendly memories of love.

CHAPTER V

JOE MUNSON, FARMER

Joe Munson and his wife, Clara, were each thirty-five years old when they were married. The courtship had extended over a period of twenty years, and each felt confident they could get along. The way in which they did get along was a matter of surprise to neighbors and satisfaction to themselves.

At the death of his father Joe came into possession of three hundred acres of as good land as Lucas County, Iowa, the home of good land, could boast. Added to the two hundred acres they were seized with, the Munson farm became the largest in the county.

For as much as three weeks at a time, in season of planting or gathering, the Postoffice, seven miles distant, was not visited. Never was mail received oftener than once a week. The nearest neighbor was two miles away, and neighbors had little time for visiting. To many people this would present a hopeless aspect, but not so to the Munsons. At least, they never acknowledged the fact if it did.

Of Joe it may be said two traits of character stood out in such prominence as to preclude all idea that he had any others. The first was a mania for getting money, and certain philosophical statements in connection therewith. The second was an inordinate fear of lightning.

The idea of getting money is at least temporarily abandoned. Joe is in bed and sick. On Tuesday he was taken down. The doctor came the next day, swathed him in bandages of various smelling liniments and promised to return soon.

The rattle-trap buggy of the doctor was hardly out of sight down the road when Aunt Becky drove her old, sun-burned bay horse up to the fence and alighted. She did not tie the animal, because, as she expressed it, "He'll stand from Dan to Utterback without it."

Every one within a day's drive knew Aunt Becky, and probably a dozen or so knew the rest of her name. Aunt Becky was a Quaker, and in many respects a most handy individual to have in a community. With no special duties in the home of her son, with whom she lived, her hours were free to use as appeared meet and proper at the time.

No one ever thought to ask her age when in her presence, mainly because she had a knack of keeping her company too busy thinking of other things. However, mothers all over the country attested she could wash and dress a baby in less time, and do it better, than any forty-year-old matron in the world. Hearty young men and robust young women, all babies in their time, were aware they owed their present constitutions to the dexterity of Aunt Becky in heading off colic, measles and sundry other infantile ailments, in days gone by. If any were not as yet aware of these things, it was wholly due to the fact the lady in question had not met up with them.

"Come right in, Aunt Becky," was the cheerful greeting from the open doorway as the visitor leisurely progressed toward the house.

"Law! Clara, how art thou? I haven't seen thee since Burl Jenkins' pig fell in the well and Joe and thee came to help out with it." The last words were spoken inside the house. Bonnet taken care of and a brush of the hands over the neat, white apron, Aunt Becky settled back in the comfortable rocker. Not until then did she see Joe on the bed.

"What in name of sense ails ye?" she asked, her surprise showing in her voice and face.

Joe was given no opportunity to answer. "The doctor says he has a case of blackleg," Clara shuddered as she spoke the word.

"Blackleg! Mercy on thee! That's a cow's disease, whatever art thou doing with it?"

"It all comes from skinning that red heifer of ours. She died with it. Joe would take off the skin, because he needed the money it would bring. I done my best, but he would do it."

"Joe Munson, at thy age!" Aunt Becky intended to say more, but Joe was now talking.

"All foolishness! I've told you, and I say it again. Mighty strange to me some people never will understand as how what is to be will be. Heifer or no heifer, skin or no skin, I was due to have blackleg."

"Land! How thee doth talk!"

Taking no notice of the interruption, Joe continued:

"Clara, you know for fifty-five years, come next Sunday, my people, and myself along of them, have expected old Joe to die of heart disease. Well, I am not gone yet. Don't that prove what I say. Besides, money was put in the world for man to get, and to lose that hide would be a slap in the face of Providence."

"Thou hast saved the hide of the heifer and stand a likely chance to lose thy own," said Aunt Becky, rocking the chair nervously.

"Yes, I guess so, but when was it ever any other way? If I plow corn, the hide wears from my hands and the old body ends up at last in pain, worn out and of no account. The money has been the only prop we've had."

"But why doth thee think always of thy body and of thy possessions? Hath thee no soul to think on? Thou needest a preacher."

"I had forgotten I had a soul," Joe murmured, so low the others failed to hear.

Clara noted Joe's attempt to evade further talk, and

again surprised the visitor by staying: "We are soon to have a preacher."

"How? Whom? What?" The questions came in startling suddenness.

"My sister Julia's boy, Ralph. He has finished in school and this week some time will be ordained a preacher. In about a month he is coming to spend the Summer and Fall with us; hopes to gain back strength, he says, and be fit to go about his business. It seems a long time since last I seen him, at the funeral of his mother. Seventeen years is a long time."

"Yes, when thee looks forward, but not as thee looks backward."

"I believe you are right, when I stop to think."

"Thee ought always to think." The gentle reproof was accepted with good grace, as it could hardly have been coming from any other source. The sick man showing some disposition to sleep, the ladies finished their visit in the garden, from which Aunt Becky took home some roots for planting and promised some in return.

Joe was unable to meet Ralph at the railroad when he came, but he was able to hobble to the front gate with the aid of crutches as a rig from the livery barn in town drew up there. The first sight of Ralph, perched on his trunk behind the seat of the driver, did not impress Joe that the young man was in immediate danger of becoming an invalid. All of six feet in height, not far under two hundred pounds in weight, he presented a splendid picture of manhood.

The feet of the newcomer struck the ground before the wagon wheels quit turning, and with an agile bound he grasped Joe's outstretched hand.

"Howdy, Uncle Joe? I'm powerful glad to see you. Where's Aunt Clara? Why using the walking sticks?"

Almost forced from his feet by the rush of the greeting, Joe managed to regain his equilibrium and

answered, "How are you? I'm as proud of you as I could be if you were really from my side of the house, 'stead of Clara's! She's out in the garden gettin' something for dinner. That," he hastened to add, as the questioning eyes of the young preacher rested on the crutches, "is a long story. Cow done it, but your Aunt Clara will see you know all the particulars."

He did hear all the particulars of that and many other things during the next few hours.

The justice done the tempting dinner on the part of the nephew, and repeated at supper that evening, caused Aunt Clara to confide to her other half at bed-time, "I believe he's hollow clear through to his toes. I don't think it's rest he's in need of."

If the first observation was wrong, the second was as decidedly right. Ralph did not need rest, and the idea of rest was far from his thought.

At the end of his school career in May a call, which he readily accepted, came to him from the church at Blender, four hundred miles south, not far from the border line of Missouri and Arkansas. December first was set as the time his ministration should officially begin. The prospective pastor knew nothing of his waiting charge save the reported membership was about two hundred and the climate a healthy one. For the present he cared to know nothing else.

That Summer was a Summer of planning, the succeeding Fall a Fall of theories worked out on paper. College training had brought methodical exactness to the graduate, and not a single plan or theory escaped being driven to a final conclusion. Sometimes the conclusion was a sore disappointment, at others an inspiring success.

The community in which his relatives and their neighbors lived in contentment—at least no one ever said otherwise—was not pleasing to Ralph. His uncle's farm was but of a piece with all others. An

uncomfortable dwelling house, leaky barn, weed-grown tottering fences; misery and discomfort on every side. The public roads were a mess of well-nigh impassable ditch-washed clay. To go was a burden, and to stay a crime. Few newspapers came to the homes and still fewer books. At first the preacher wondered why so few young men and women were left in the homes. He knew now.

One evening, after a long day of labor in the dusty field, the prematurely old farmer and his nephew were seated on the grass before the front door. For some moments both had been engaged in thought. The silence was broken at length as the younger man spoke.

"Uncle, don't you love the land?"

"Love it? No, I hate it! Sixteen hours a day of hard work in rain and heat, dust and mud—no—I—I hate it; at least sometimes."

"But don't you think God intended for man to love the land, to live and enjoy it?"

"It is for men who know more than I to say. I do know one acre of this land ought to grow as much as three acres does. Look at me! Look at Clara! Old and worn out ten years before our time. The worst of it is, we have nothing to show for it, except a few hundred dollars."

"But why do people go on and on when there is a better way?"

"This country is full of fifty-year-old old men. If the most of them have a soul, they have forgotten; the grind of the soil is a good thing to help the forgetting. I have a binder out in the shed yonder; it has a sickle to cut the grain and a knotter to tie the bundle. They work well in their places, but the knotter would be an ass to get down and try to cut the grain. God meant for men who have been with Him to lead other men to the beauties of life as it is around them."

Joe brushed his work-worn right hand surreptitiously across his eyes, and with a suspicion of quaver in his voice talked on.

"Sometimes in the night I reach out my hands across the bed to tuck the cover over a child that isn't there. It breaks my heart. Many's the time I've caught Clara in tears; for nothing, she says—but I know. Responsibility shirking is natural, and carries always its own punishment. Elder White has come to Cross Roads Church and preached every Sunday for twenty year. If he ever looked into a single hogpen, patted a child on the head, helped to improve a mile of road, or told a farmer how to lessen the killing grind of toil, I never heard of it. Always build—build up a membership in the church—a membership that's never growed. The only difference between me and him—we have both missed it—and I have missed farthest; I suppose he is saved and I'm not."

The thoughts that flashed across the mind of the younger man were laden with the possibilities of revealed service. The soul within was moved to part-formed vows of the common-place in ministry. It was with a certain awe he placed his hand on Joe's shoulder.

"And have you given no thought to your soul?"

"Bless you, my boy, when I was afraid not to, I have." A rough hand uplifted rested on the smoother one. "When love's away, fear holds forth. Religion in these parts is because men are afraid not to be religious. Love is forgotten, and trembling has the victory. Twenty years ago it could have been different, but not now. The last sigh of old men like me will be a sigh of fear."

The opening of a screen door interrupted the conversation. Clara reminded them of the late hour and insisted they be off to bed in order to get the early start to town they expected on the morrow.

Upstairs in his room Ralph sat for hours writing. The value of fear in things religious was his theme, and he did it full justice. In a small roll, tied about with a piece of binder twine, it reposed on the table, as its author in his sleep helped from the backs of countless men and women great bundles of burdens.

It was an unwilling body the preacher forced out of bed at dawn. Hastily dressing, he hurried downstairs, arriving in time to hear Clara tell Joe to put that sick calf with the swollen jaws in a lot away from the other cattle. The task soon accomplished, attention was concentrated on the breakfast. Little was said during the progress of the meal, except an occasional reminder by Clara of some articles she wished Joe to bring home in exchange for eggs and butter she was sending.

"And I do hope you will get a good mowing machine while you are gettin'," she remarked as, for the third time, the biscuit plate was replenished.

"It's not the fault of the machines they wear out, no more than it is our fault we wear out. It's just because of the meaning of the thing. It wouldn't be fit for one machine to go on cutting grass forever. Any one man living on and on would get powerful lonesome, because no one would understand him or try to sympathize with him. The great Leveler of the universe takes care of men and machines." Having finished his say, Joe went out to hitch up, leaving Ralph to ponder the meaning of the words.

Notwithstanding the early start, the day was far advanced when Joe drew up the team at the hitching rack in town. While on the road neither of the men made any attempt to reopen the talk of the night before. The thoughts of the elder had to do with hay, which happened to be the most pressing thing on hand at present. The younger was far off to the South, his

mind busy with a place he had never seen, with people he had never met.

Two hours later Ralph was disturbed rather suddenly from a comfortable chair in a neat little book store, where he had wandered the first ten minutes in town, by Joe's excited voice speaking to him from the street.

"There's a storm coming and a row will be to pay all the way from kingdom-come to the undertaker's and back again! Let's be off."

Ralph dropped the book from his hands to the counter, ran hastily to the wagon, and they were away.

Joe was right in the information he gave, but entirely wrong in trying to reach home before the storm broke. Three miles out it came. Roll after roll of thunder split the heavens and shook the earth as an earthquake. One vivid flash of lightning followed another, until it appeared the whole earth beneath and heaven about was one rolling ball of forked, darting fire. Joe gave one look at the mowing machine tied behind the wagon, seen the lightning playing over the steel and glancing off to the ground, then collapsed to a cowering heap in the bottom of the wagon box. The blinding sheets of rain made it impossible for the team to keep the road further. Instinctively they lowered their unchecked heads toward the ground and stood still.

Through his chattering teeth Joe finally managed to ask: "Ralph, can you pray at such a time?"

"Yes. That is, I believe so," said the preacher, trying to wipe the suffocating water from his nostrils.

"Do—do you think there is any hope for a poor, wretched, blind old sinner like—like me?"

"Certainly I do."

"Then pray, son; pray for your poor old uncle!"

Down in the wagon box they knelt, the arm of nephew supporting uncle as the prayer progressed.

Months after it was all over Joe one day told his wife it was the prayenest prayer he ever heard prayed.

With the fervent "Amen!" a wonderful change came over Joe. Fear gave place to laughter and trembling to periods of joyful tears. The severity of the storm was at last spent and the remainder of the road home was enlivened with Joe's testimony. Every fresh presentation of his wonderful new experience was sure to end: "I tell you, lad, I have no desire to swear. Taste for it all gone. Glory Hallelujah!"

When the mud-bedaubed and water-soaked men reached the house they found supper ready, the sick calf dead, and Mrs. Munson clearing water out of the kitchen with a mop.

Ralph ate a light supper and retired to his room nursing a headache. The flash of lantern light across his window and certain noises in the barn lot, among others expostulation on the part of Aunt Clara, told him Joe was skinning the calf.

In the feeble light of next morning, around the corner of a rail corn crib, Ralph discovered Joe pommeling a cow with the milk stool, while upon his ears fell a string of blood-curdling oaths. Joe was fallen from grace.

A solitary gray goose, an early emigrant from Northern lakes, was disturbed at breakfast on the old horse pond by an alarming swish in the air. A small roll, tied about with a piece of binder twine, and weighted down with a fragment of rock, fell in the water at his side and disappeared, leaving but a ripple on the surface.

With the closing days of September the desire to see and be on his field of labor, that had been growing in his heart for weeks, became irresistible. Ralph owned to himself over and over that Joe Munson's quaint philosophy had a vast deal to do with awakening the desire. Joe himself would hardly have claimed

practical wisdom had any part in the largely one-sided talks he had with Ralph.

When his determination to go was told to the old people they offered no objection, nor asked any questions. They appeared to understand all about it.

The day of Ralph's departure Joe was sick. The doctor came in the night, and before the shade of another night had fallen, people far and near knew Joe Munson had the lumpjaw.

"It's all right, my boy," Joe said, as he took Ralph's hand in parting. "What is to be will be. I was due to have lumpjaw, and if that calf had never been born I would had it anyhow."

With a wave of her hand, deprecative of what she had heard, Aunt Clara smiled her good-by.

"Yes, when Joe gets through with cattle diseases we may come and visit you." The laugh as they parted included all.

Many times Ralph recalled the old people with a smile and a prayer of gratitude.

CHAPTER VI

FEED MY SHEEP

The large cloth awning over the front of the Blender Mercantile Company store, in response to a last strong pull at the ropes, went to its place high up on the front of the building, with a crash.

The day was over, and Silas Warner, Postmaster and proprietor of the store, was heartily glad of it. The day had been an unusually hard one; trade had been brisk, the mails heavy, and one clerk sick at home. Those who came night and morning for mail had come and gone, and the store was deserted save by three or four men sitting on boxes or lounging on counters. It was a part of their every-day life to be there at locking-up time. Still another man, who had entered unnoticed by the Postmaster, busy at the awning, was standing to one side, in the shadow cast by the large brass lamp suspended from the ceiling. Aside from a swift glance on the part of each man in the house, a glance that displayed no real interest, no attention was paid to his coming. It was Ralph Glenwood's first welcome to Blender.

Presently Mr. Warner entered the store, up-ended a box and sat down on it, vigorously mopping his head with a handkerchief.

"Been hot to-day!" remarked one of the men.

"Yes," drawled Mr. Warner.

"It reminds me of the day we baled hay for old Uncle John Newton."

The voice of the speaker struck Ralph as being the most pleasing he had ever heard, with something about it that caused him to survey, over and over, the past as he listened. A mellow drawl accompanied the

speech, not to be imitated, and once heard, never forgotten. Surely, he pondered, I have heard that voice, or one like it, but where?"

"What about the hay?" one of the listeners urged.

"Well, old John, that is—he was—er, I mean—that is to say, he was peculiar. We baled fifteen tons of hay for him and the thermometer stood right around a hundred the whole time. Two tons of it went to old John's son-in-law, the one who was nearly killed by a log rolling over him. He had a large family of children, and his wife worked out to keep them going. Two more tons went to Peg-leg Sam, who lost his left foot in a sorghum mill the Winter the fish were all frozen to death in Mill Creek."

On and on the narrative of the hay continued, and one by one the hearers thinned out, until, when the eleventh ton was delivered, none remained but Ralph and one other. This one now interrupted: "I must be going, Silas, but I will come back in the morning to hear you bale and sell them other four ton." So saying, he went out in the night.

Mr. Warner became aware of Ralph's presence now, as the young man advanced with hand outstretched, introducing himself as he came.

"I am Ralph Glenwood," he said.

"The new preacher! I'll be giggled! I happen to be one of the elders. My name is Warner, but every man and most of the women call me Silas. Come in on the 'Bob?'"

"Yes, if that is what you call the train."

Further conversation was prevented just then by the entrance of a third party; a well-dressed man of perhaps fifty years, slightly gray-haired, and dignified in carriage.

"Here's a go!" exclaimed Silas. "Brother Dempster, meet Brother Glenwood. The old and the new, as it were."

The two preachers shook hands with a mutual "Glad to meet you."

Turning to Silas and taking the proffered hand, Mr. Dempster said: "I am away early in the morning and came to say good-by."

"I wish you luck in your new place," Silas responded.

"If I do it will be more than I have had here." He turned toward Ralph as he spoke. "I sincerely hope you may get on, sir."

"Of course, I hope so."

Hardly knowing Ralph had spoken, Mr. Dempster proceeded: "For two years I have done my level best. My doctrine has been orthodox all the time. People seem to care nothing except to raise so much corn, so many hogs, and make the house of God a visiting place on Sunday.

"When I first came to Blender I had great hopes of building the largest congregation in the Presbytery of Ozark. Their pride would not stir, and I have come out with fewer people than when we started. My salary has been paid, but barely so. If I do bear testimony of myself, no man can accuse me of failing to preach the truth. My warnings of the realities of Hell will not soon be forgotten. Do you think so, Silas?"

"I must say," responded Silas, "you were an uncommon preacher along that line. Our boy, Frank, went upstairs alone to sleep before you came; now he says he sees devils in the dark. Often in his sleep he cries out for us to take them away."

The preacher appeared doubtful of this compliment to his ability, and continued his address to Ralph.

"If I can be of any help to you I shall be glad. You will find some good people, but many of them

are chuck full of old Satan. You have, Mr. Glenwood, a lot of country 'Jakes' to preach to."

"I am obliged to you for the information," was all Ralph could form words to say, as another round of handshake, and the turning out of the flame in the large brass lamp, ended the interview.

The air of the quiet, deserted street was refreshing as Ralph and his new found friend walked on. The walk was one of silent thought to the very gate of a pretty, one-story white cottage, in the midst of a well-kept lawn. As he lifted the latch of the gate and stood aside to permit his guest to enter, with an impressive shrug of his shoulders, Silas remarked:

"You can hold a cork under water, but it is its nature to float on top, and the very second your thumb is removed it will bob to the surface. Brother Dempster would have made a good sewing machine agent."

Ralph's first night at Blender was a night of plans rather than sleep. How to best show the people, so very much depreciated by the minister he was following, his whole desire was to be of genuine service to the whole community, excluding none, rather than the building of a great church, was the problem he resolved in his mind and heart, again and again.

At length he slept, and when awakened by the early song birds in the oaks outside his window, Ralph knew in his heart, the long night of his past life was well spent; the morning was come, and on the shore of Tiberias Sea, he, too, heard, as men of old once heard, the sweet voiced Master: "Feed my sheep."

CHAPTER VII

RALPH FINDS A HOME

On the summit of the highest elevation in Blender, reached by a gradually rising path which wound its picturesque way in and out through tangled rose vines, and dwarf cedars, the latter green all the year, reposed the home of Casper Dwight.

A man of sixty years was Mr. Dwight, amiable in disposition, but retiring in nature. Town and country alike saw but little of him, save at the church on Sunday, or on Wednesday night. Those most regular in their attendance at services could not recall a time when he was absent. At home his time was largely given to reading and drawing sweet music from the violin, ever by his side. When for a time he left the house, his walk took him to less traveled paths and across quiet fields. Investments in a distant city, people rather guessed than knew—furnished the means of livelihood for himself and family.

At the house on the hill people were impressed. Mr. Dwight was glad to see them. His splendid gift of conversation, replete with knowledge from years of studious habits, left a never forgotten charm in the minds of those who called there, and they were many. Sometimes his friends wondered why their visits were never repaid, but as years went by, bringing no change, they accepted the condition as a settled matter.

On quiet evenings, children playing in the yards and on the streets far below, would stop and listen

to the sweet strains of music floating down to them on the air, clapping their hands in glee. Strong men would talk in subdued tones as they heard, and good-nights would have more love in them because of the music.

Thanking heartily his host of the night, and praising the kindness of Mrs. Warner, soon after breakfast, Ralph climbed the path and knocked at the door of the house on the hill. A form such as he thought had never before met his sight came in response to the knock. A girl—his first guess at her age was eighteen years—a surprisingly shrewd guess at that. The house gown of some light material, unknown to Ralph, well became her slender figure. Fluffy, golden-brown hair, well arranged, hazel eyes that had in them a hint of laughter—a decidedly pretty face. Ralph took it all in as he stood for a blissful one-half moment, hat in hand.

"I—I am the new minister," he stammered, the color mounting to his forehead.

Frankly extending her hand in greeting, the girl smiled. The smile some way made the new minister happier than he remembered ever being in his life.

"I am Alice Dwight," she simply said, withdrawing her hand from his.

Leading the way to the library she announced the arrival of the new minister to her father and mother. "I have forgotten the name." She turned to Ralph to supply it.

With some embarrassment he remembered the omission at the door. "Glenwood, Ralph Glenwood," he hastened to say. The welcome he received was cordial on the part of both. The older woman was a counterpart of the younger, Ralph thought, in everything save youth.

"We were not expecting you for some time yet, but your home is ready for you."

The words of Mrs. Dwight bore a friendliness that put Ralph instantly at his ease.

"I had not expected to come so soon," he answered, "but my desire to be on the field of, I trust, my future usefulness, got the better of me and I am here."

"We want you to feel at home as, indeed, you really are, so far as we are concerned," added Mr. Dwight, as his part of the welcome.

"I trust I may prove as worthy of the honor you do me as I sincerely feel in my heart I ought to do." Ralph was moved by the sincere, gracious words of his new landlord.

"We expect, of course, your labors among us will be laden with honor enough to go all the way around."

"There is just one thing in the way so far as I know now. If I handle self—and I know full well the magnitude of my task, success is assured even now."

"Lord grant you success at the task!" It was a prayer, so startling in the way it was expressed, Ralph glanced hurriedly at the speaker. His face had become plainly pallid, and he was as plainly confused.

"It's nothing, Mr. Glenwood," he hastened with the assurance. "It just struck me many men find self an intolerable task master. Perhaps with you it will be different."

The conversation drifted on to other themes, including an amiable understanding of financial remuneration for room and board. Mrs. Dwight and Alice shared in the conversation so long as pressing household duties permitted, and with courtly excuses retired. Then for half an hour followed such

music as only a master hand can draw from instrument. Oblivious of things about him, from one weird, enchanting strain to another, the player coaxed his violin. Now slow, now fast, but always with a melodious mellowness that flowed past the sense of hearing and fell with gentle rhythm on the heart. Ralph remembered in the woods one day having discovered a mother robin mourning over a dead baby bird at her feet. The despair of her song called tears to his eyes, and saddened the entire day. The grief of the mother heart was recalled now, and tears traced their way unchecked down the face.

"I love it, I love my violin!" The hand of the player fondled the instrument as a fond father would pet his child. Ralph was sorry the music had ended. The idea that he had indeed found a home was further confirmed when he entered his room upstairs. From the snow-white counterpane on the bed to the bookcase in the corner it was complete. Carpet, chairs, curtains, all pretty, but serviceable. Again a sigh of thankfulness escaped his lips as he beheld the painstaking provision for his comfort.

Throwing open the shutters of the east window exposed a view that compelled one to stand in admiration. The panorama spread out before was finished to the last detail. To the left, on somewhat lower ground, stood the church, a great white building carpeted about with green, its tall tower pointing heavenward; a standing invitation for men to look up. Down below ran the main street of the little city, on either end of it residences of citizens thickly dotted, and in the middle a cluster of business houses. Here and there, above and below the main thoroughfare, were other homes, not on streets, having as they stood much the appearance

of a checker-board. Well worn paths led to the door of each.

Beyond Main Street, winding its way up and down the valley, and lost in either direction between two hills, lay the railroad. Less than six years before the first trains had run. From away to the south, and off toward the north, beyond the reach of sight, marking a line more crooked than imagination could draw, were giant trees, nourished by the clear, cold waters of Honey Creek. To the east of the stream arose in rapid succession the high, rocky, bald-knobs of the Ozarks. The sunlight dancing from them in continuous glimmer, for all the world like threads of burnished silver, a thousand spring-fed rivulets wormed their way down to lower ground, becoming lost to sight amid the trees.

Over all the view a wealth of autumnal color spread that pleased the eye and charmed the soul.

Small wonder, as Ralph beheld, he felt the hour for worship had struck. Reverently he sank to his knees in prayer, and in this position Mr. Dwight found him when noon came.

Years before the great war between the States there had been a post office and small store of merchandise at Blender. Up the creek, perhaps seven miles distant, there had been a sawmill. The smoke of illicit stills arose from a dozen hills over east. The second year of the war an army came up from the South and were driven back by a Northern force. When the smoke of battle cleared away, the post office, store and sawmill were gone, and the stills ceased to send out their smoke.

The conflict had been ended two years before the first settler came back to make his home in those parts. Houses were all gone and nothing left to tell where they once stood save charred pieces of

wood. Rail fences had been used to replenish camp fires and, in short, little was in sight to show man had ever lived there. But if the war destroyed the first settlement of the country, it was also the cause of settling it up again.

Soldiers had seen the fertile valleys and rolling prairies, and drank from the bubbling springs. The climate was delightful, forest abundant, every prospect pleasing, and so they came. Good men and still better women from all parts of the reunited country helped to reclaim the aggravated wilderness. Blender as a post office was restored, and with it came the store and blacksmith shop. The farmers on the great expanse of prairie land west of Blender prospered. The little hamlet was their trading point, and it, too, prospered. Such was Blender when the railroad came. Men said it could not be done, but it was. Over bridges, sometimes a hundred feet high, tunneling into solid rock in instances nearly half a mile, through cuts almost as deep as the bridges are high, the trains now run more than two hundred miles through the very heart of the Ozarks. With the railroad came a prosperity such as but few of the people in and around Blender ever dreamed of. Additional business houses were erected and occupied, new residences built and old ones improved. The church and a school house followed as a matter of course. While the town was prospering in a material way the farmers about were reaping their reward. Land had doubled in value and few could be found who cared to sell. Long promised comfortable houses were provided, and live stock had the satisfaction of living under shelter.

Such was Blender, and the country around it, when Ralph Glenwood came.

CHAPTER VIII

CASPER DWIGHT'S STORY

Ralph's first evening in his new home was a never-forgotten one to him. Mrs. Dwight and her daughter were away attending the meeting of a church society of which they were a part. From an open porch, on the west of the house, and almost directly under him, there came to Ralph in his room the listless tones of the violin. Afterward he knew there came times to Mr. Dwight when he could not, or cared not, to play. Idly he sat picking the strings.

"I hope I am not intruding?" Ralph inquired as he stepped on the porch.

Mr. Dwight was startled. "Not a bit. Come, have a chair," he added, arising to push one forward. For some time the two men sat in silence looking off toward the prairie beyond which the sun had gone to rest, the whole sky a red glow from its dying light.

"Pretty, isn't it?" finally Mr. Dwight queried. The match he lighted to start his pipe going illuminated a sorrowful face.

Ralph made no answer. Instinctively he felt his friend had more to say.

"Mr. Glenwood, your remark about 'self' this morning came near upsetting me."

So I perceived, thought Ralph, but wisely he did not speak.

"It came because of a long struggle in my own life. I—I had forgotten other men might have some of the same battle to fight, even if not from same causes. I feel someway, may be because of

what you said, it would do me good to tell you my story."

Ralph hitched his chair a little closer as Mr. Dwight continued.

"Children are taught to picture the Devil as a thing in red, repulsive in every detail, and bearing horns and tail. It's all a lie to teach such nonsense! The very purpose of evil would be defeated if it came in such a way. The Devil comes wearing the garb of a gentleman or in the form of a seemingly lovely woman.

"There are paths in the lives of most all men, Mr. Glenwood, back from whence they came, they would rather not go over."

Mr. Dwight laid aside his pipe as he continued.

"I don't propose to ever travel this path again if I can help it.

"More than forty years ago it was, that a young man brought his bride from Tennessee to his small farm nine miles above here, in the fertile Honey Creek valley. There has been many a sweet woman in the lives of men before and since, Mr. Glenwood, but never one like her. Frail as the petals of a rosebud, as clinging in her nature as the tendrils of yonder jessamine.

"Two years of Eden passed all too quickly. The sky was always fair to them, and abundant reward crowned their labor in the field and home. Contentment marked the pathway of the morning, and mutual love eased the pain of toil when the busy day was over. Never, thought the young couple, was there greater happiness.

"Early in the third year of their bliss there came a man. He was genteel, educated and winning. Wonderful alike to man and woman of the simple country, were the tales of cities he brought from the teeming North. It was a generous welcome

the young husband accorded the stranger, in the simplicity of his happy heart rejoicing in the possession of another friend.

"To make a long story shorter, Mr. Glenwood, the wife began to care for the stranger. The husband, poor fool, never guessed it, and urged more frequent visits of the devil in human garb. Stories of wonderful life out in the world, and the urging of a new found love ruined her paradise. One morning they were gone.

"My friend, that wronged husband was myself. When the truth came I was wild; for days I wandered in the woods, calling my Alice, and no answer ever came. I sold what I had and set out to find her. The world was bigger than even I had thought. From city to city I wandered, broken hearted and in despair, but no trace of my love. A year wound out its tedious length, my money gave out, and I was compelled to give up the quest.

"I obtained employment in a shoe factory and deadened the pain in a measure by the energy of my labor. One day while returning from the factory, face to face, on a secluded street, I met the man. He told me he had left her, and where. I knocked him down and choked his throat until the blood surged into his face, and his legs stiffened. God knows I meant to kill him! The very fury of my purpose defeated its end.

"I found her in a boarding house in a large city sick unto death. For a week every possible means was used to save her, and then she died in my arms, crying unto me to forgive her. Poor child, I tried to assure her there was nothing to forgive. We put her body to rest in a grave among strangers, and as the clods fell upon the box, my only remembered feeling was one of thankfulness that he, too, was dead.

"Over the world on both sides of the water I traveled afterward, never long in one place, ever pressed onward by the unrest of my heart. I was more fortunate in a material way than I deserved, and behind me in many places were left investments that paid well.

"If one had told me in younger days there was room in a man's heart for two great loves I would not have believed. But it was true. On the coast of Florida, at a small, fashionable water place, I met my wife. It grew in time to be a case of mutual affection, and we were married.

"Years before the coming of the railroad we established our home here. In time our happiness was fully completed by the coming of our baby. We named her Alice. The suggestion came from my wife, who long since knew my story, and I was glad to have it so."

Mr. Dwight sat silent so long Ralph began to think the story ended. In a futile way he racked his brain for something to say, the attempt ending only in a sigh. Drawing his chair still closer, and in subdued tones, Mr. Dwight went on:

"It's a big world, Mr. Glenwood, and strange things do happen in it. When the news of the railroad coming started the boom in Blender, among those who came was the man I thought dead for twenty-eight years. I felt I had forgotten the revengeful vow once taken, but it rolled in a torrent on my brain and heart. Had I a weapon at hand he should have died then and there. Determined to kill him, I came home for a gun, and remained to play my violin.

"The only solace I had in the bitter years of my sorrow was the instrument. It has been my companion in happy years, and to a certainty has caused my love for my wife and child to grow as days have

grown. But that is not all. For seven years it has saved me from Hell.

"I don't see things now as I used to. In my heart there is no desire to kill, but the old demon comes at times and sets me on fire of the pit. When he does come my violin has power to charm my soul—my inner self—back to paths of manhood. I've had many a tussle with self, these years, Mr. Glenwood.

"It is only at times I have trouble. No one knows our story, save my wife, and he and I, and now you. It is well no more should know. Only you and I know he is here, 'tis well. I need your help, Mr. Glenwood; your help in prayer."

The story was finished.

"I sympathize with you, Mr. Dwight, and if my prayer can help I will be only too glad."

As he spoke Ralph grasped the hand held out to him and held it in a firm clasp.

"And who is the man?" he added.

The hand he held trembled as Mr. Dwight answered, "The man is Oliver Dodd."

"Dodd, the banker?"

"Yes."

On the library table as he passed on his way upstairs lay an open book. The page was soiled with much handling, and a verse had been heavily marked with pencil. Ralph knew the verse: "So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also unto you, if ye from your hearts forgive not every one his brother their trespasses."

CHAPTER IX

A VOICE FROM THE NIGHT

Ralph occupied the pulpit at Blender church nearly two months sooner than he had expected. The official body of the congregation held a meeting on Friday evening, following his arrival, and the sense of their deliberation, as conveyed to the minister later in the evening by Silas Warner, was to the effect he should take hold at once.

"Don't see any use," said the messenger, "in wasting the time. The late lamented is gone, and we run a risk of letting some of the flock starve between this and December."

"Very well," Ralph replied. "I am here, and it suits me to work."

Accordingly, the following Sabbath morning a new preacher walked down one of the spacious aisles of the church, and treading lightly up the three steps to the pulpit platform, faced the audience.

The church building at Blender was not unlike thousands of others, unless in size. A great one-room building, slightly longer than broad, plain and substantial in furnishings. A small lean-to room, into which a door opened from the right of the pulpit, served as a pastor's study. Back of the pulpit, built into the end of the room, was the great organ. Ralph guessed its cost was greater than that of the building itself. Long lines of pews, above the average in comfort, separated by three aisles, furnished sitting room for five hundred people. These were well filled as the organ gave out its sweet prelude.

When Ralph had looked into the face,—a most charming one,—of the organist, as selection of hymns was made, he felt he had made the acquaintance of a person above the ordinary, and that he had one more friend. Now that the services were begun, and his back turned, he could not have given a partial description of her, but he did remember she was young, also pretty, and he felt he was pleased with her. In tones almost divine the organ pealed out its message. Every heart knew the hands sweeping over the keys were sending out the sincere worship of an allied soul, a worship echoed from the lips of each one in the pews as they arose to sing.

The theme of the speaker was "Service." In musical tones that fell with exquisite favor on the ear and compelled attention he developed his subject.

"We are not here simply to build up a great congregation," the preacher said. "The first duty of any church is service; to improve, as it may, the lives of the people. When the church comes in every day contact with life in a helpful way that life will respond in a manner helpful to the church. To help a man raise two bushels of corn where one grows now is helpful, and to show him how to lessen hours of labor in doing it, is Christ-like.

"To lead in the improvement of country roads is not one whit beneath the dignity of the church, and in doing so it reaps helpfulness unto itself, and honor to all concerned.

"Indeed, the church is meant to be the very heart of all life. To improve the intellectual and social life, as well as the spiritual, should be the aim of societies. To use God's out-of-doors in directing the play of the boys should be, and is, the best opportunity, seconding the influence of the home, for the church to make sure of a continued future.

"When a man has been kicked by the cow he is milk-

ing, and the milk spilled down his boots, I say it reverently, its a mighty poor time to talk religion to him." A smile went over the faces of the audience, but it was plain they half-guessed the point. Ralph continued: "But help him to bind up his injuries, and if you have been fortunate enough to have had a like experience, tell him of it, and tell him how you broke the animal of her habit. When you have finished, the ordinary man will listen to what you have to say, and the saying will reach his soul.

"Some people think a boy naturally wants to be good, but true experience has shown otherwise. Men are only boys, a few years removed, and the advantage to themselves must be distinctly shown before they will heed the call to a changed idea of soul-life. This opportunity lies out before us. It is possible for us to make the church a center around which all our lives shall revolve as an every day matter, and when we have done this, concern as to whether or no we shall be a great church will have passed away. No need for concern will remain."

Ralph went on at length explaining the things he hoped in time to see accomplished. A recreation ground for boys; a literary and study room for girls, and boys as well, when they cared to use it. For women was proposed clubs, in which the peculiar problems of their lives could be gone over, and systematically helped. Then his pet of all projects, a small experimental tract of land, where improved theories regarding crops and live stock could be worked out. It was the great hope of his heart, next to winning souls he told them, to make this a great factor in the interest of the church. That men would cease to regard land as a mere thing of bread and butter, and see the God-given privilege of serving the world, and in partnership with Him, edify their own souls.

A possible seven-eighths of the audience delighted

in the sermon, and in their hearts determined to enter into the plans of the new minister. The novelty of the thing interested them and the practicability of the plans appealed to good judgment. Of the balance, a few didn't know, and a still smaller few were among themselves, avowedly antagonistic.

That the first part of the minority had entirely missed the message, was exemplified by Sister Burns, who remarked, as she in turn grasped the preacher's hand in front of the altar; "Brother Dempster always faced West when he administered the Lord's Supper. Don't you think the minister ought to look East?" "U-huh;" was an ungracious answer, but the only one the preacher could make.

The remainder had not missed the true note of the morning. They simply objected to it. Among these were Oliver Dodd, John Keiffer and Newton Kiel, all elders, and a majority of the session of five. Their objection was not presented to Ralph just then, but something in the glance of their eyes, and the ominous nodding of their respective heads, as he passed where they stood in a group, told him as well as words.

"Oh! Brother Glenwood,—I think I shall call you that—I am so glad!" It was the voice of Alice speaking, and as she spoke she gave her hand. Pressure answered pressure as if in understanding, as she continued; "We have so longed for something of your plans, and now it has come. We'll make the most of them, won't we 'Tommy'?"

Ralph turned his eyes hurriedly from the face of the girl to the one at her side. It was his organist. The strangeness of the name startled him, and he was far from composed as he spoke to her. "I thank you heartily for the music of the morning—Miss;—I don't believe I heard your name."

"Dodd;" Alice volunteered, before the young lady could reply for herself; "I thought you knew."

With a strangely sweet voice Miss Dodd now spoke, saying; "It does my heart good to play, Mr. Glenwood. That is my part in the worship." What she thought of the plans outlined was not spoken then, as the dinner call urgently interrupted.

Thoughts of the old Rock River Association came to Ralph as he stood at the head of the long table lined with its rows of expectant faces. The thanks he offered came from a heart truly filled with gratitude. Little to be desired in things to eat had been left unaccomplished by the good housewives. From the kindness of his heart the preacher indulged slightly in a sample of every cake presented to him, an accomplishment that did not add to the interest of the afternoon sermon, yet a thing repeated so often as they gathered around that Sunday table. From early May, so long as weather would permit, a morning and afternoon sermon, with dinner between, was the rule. The visit at noon and after the close of evening service added not a little to the pleasure of the Sabbath. Ralph enjoyed to the full the pleasure of his new-found flock. It seemed strange the while, but the idea came as the proper thing altogether that he should be interested in each one, and desire to know more of them. Not as the acquaintance of a day, rather the friends of a life time, they grew on him.

One face among others his eyes sought oftener; the face of Alice Dwight. Constantly he gazed elsewhere, and just as constantly, moved by an impulse he could not fathom, permitted his eyes to wander back. Of those who looked upon his face, none sought it more frequently nor with better approval of flashing eyes, than did the Blender church organist.

The day was a success. Ralph voted it so, while he sat when the shades of night were drawn, looking over the backs of his hastily arranged books on their shelves. Far from books were the thoughts. Every

event of the day was gone over, approved or found fault with. Highly pleased, he could not help being with the well nigh unanimity of feeling his plans met. Nor could he prevent a feeling of intense disappointment in the few who showed so plainly their disapproval. He had hoped to have their aid, but no matter. Over and over a picture came into his mind. The fair face, graceful manner and lovely form of Alice. The picture fell with a peaceful charm on delighted senses, and no attempt was made to dismiss it.

"Glenwood, don't be a donkey"; he muttered to himself as he threw off his coat and turned out the light. "You've too many problems out ahead; no time to spend in day-dreams."

The tired body sank into the luxurious comfort of the bed, and the mind composed itself for rest.

"Mr. Glenwood; O-O-Mr. Glenwood!" The eyes of the sleeper opened, and staring into the darkness of the room he wondered if he had been dreaming. Again, and from the ground beneath the open window came the voice—"Mr. Glenwood; O-O-Mr. Glenwood!" The voice had a touch somehow, which struck Ralph as being familiar, but he could not remember. At any rate he knew it was a pleasant one. Hastily arising he crossed the room to the window. Leaning upon the sill he peered into the darkness as he asked; "Who is it? What is wanted?"

"Its Allan of the Sycamore; He wants to tell you."

"Its who?" inquired Ralph, trying to make out an indistinct figure among the shrubbery.

"Just Allan, that's all. Allan of the Sycamore."

"Allan, of what?" The question was one of puzzled earnestness.

"Where the whip-poor-will sings; 'way up over Allan's head. Water sings and sighs over the roots, and the voices talk to Allan. The Sycamore." A low musical laugh came from the lips of the speaker.

"And what can I do for Allan?" Ralph asked, becoming more and more interested.

"For Allan? Nothing for Allan. Allan does not forget. Something in the heart won't let him forget. Friend once to Allan, is a friend always to Allan—at night—not in great, white Sun thing. Enemy is enemy, even in night, when voices talk."

"Where is your home?"

"Home?" There was a pause. "Where the water sings at the Sycamore—there be home—Allan and the star-things play—Allan does not forget."

"What can I call you; have you no name?"

"When the water sings—and voices talk—it is to Allan they speak. You-You-call me Allan; no, call me Brother, Brother Allan—Allan will call you Brother."

"I trust we may, indeed, be Brothers," Ralph replied in earnest.

"Allan does not forget—he can't—and Allan tells Brother be careful. Men are bad to Allan—they be bad to Brother—man in big, red house-thing—Brother watch him. Young man, too, watch him. Allan says watch, and, and, Allan knows. He sees in the night."

"You mean Oliver Dodd? The brick house?"

"Allan has said, and he does not forget. Allan will watch, in night; when water sings—Allan will hear, and, and, Allan of the Sycamore, does not forget."

"And why?" Ralph started to question, but retreating footsteps told him his mysterious visitor had gone.

Quietly Ralph made his way downstairs, and out to the shrubbery. No trace was left behind by Allan of the Sycamore. Overhead, high overhead, whip-poor-wills sang their pathetic sentence.

CHAPTER X

OLIVER DODD ASSERTS HIMSELF

"I am plenty able to take care of my own affairs, Mr. Glenwood, and further, I don't think much of your plans." The speaker was Oliver Dodd, and he was plainly angry.

The two were seated in the library of the banker's home, whence Ralph had come to talk over plans of church work. Ralph was feeling far more deeply than his voice betrayed when he made answer: "I have no intention of interfering in your affairs in any sense, Mr. Dodd. I had only hoped to interest you in the great forward movement we expect to carry out."

"Forward movement! bosh!" The great hand of the banker fell with a crash on the arm of his chair. "Forward movement for a lot of numskull farmers! Recreation ground for a lot of lazy boys; and reading rooms for silly girls! Not a cent of money from me, sir, nor one moment of time."

"Granting these failings of people are true, in a measure, don't you think under proper conditions they could be remedied?"

"No, sir. They can't be helped. If a man has it in him he will come out right; if not, all the trying between here and the last trump won't help him. The Farmer's Elevator went to smash because they, themselves, wouldn't support it. Their Co-Operative store went the same road and for the same reason."

"An appeal to selfish interests, those things, and we cannot expect people to long continue in them. What I propose is not selfish in any sense, having to

do with every life in the community and with every home, as it does."

"I am capable of taking care of my home, and others must do the same. When I get to the point where I cannot manage my own son and daughter, you need not look for me to turn the matter over to the church. I will call in the officers."

Thinking it could be of no profit to longer continue the interview, Ralph arose to go, but Mr. Dodd motioned him back to his chair as he said: "No, Mr. Glenwood, sit down. There is no time so good to speak one's mind as when one is ready to speak, and I don't expect to use your valuable time to any extent hereafter. The church can get along fairly well without me, and I can, I am sure, do without it. I only want you to know my sentiment in the matter. Whenever a man, be he preacher or banker, meddles in things beyond his sphere, he turns out a failure. You were invited here to preach; already you are trying to work over every interest in the community."

"I do not see, Mr. Dodd, that your criticism applies to myself any more than it does to you. You can have it as you please. I satisfy myself with one observation. The church does not suffer because one man quits his place of duty. The ranks close up and the church goes on triumphant. It will do it here and now. In the long run, when you find out how much more than the church you have suffered, I want you to remember I tried to be your friend and you would not."

Not waiting to be shown the way, Ralph quitted the room.

In the spacious front hallway, Ralph was confronted by Tommy, as he reached for his hat. She placed her hand lightly on his arm, as in a subdued, tremulous voice she said:

"Mr. Glenwood, I am sorry. Papa will change his

mind someday, maybe, though he seldom ever does. But you can count on me." She blushed prettily as she said it and Ralph laid his hand caressingly on hers as he replied: "I thank you sincerely."

In her room later Tommy threw herself on the bed and cried; cried for the first time since she could remember.

No one knew for sure how the news of the preacher's interview with the banker became public property, but the whole country knew of it. Silas Warner, in a crude way expressed the feeling of most people, and raised a laugh at his own expense, when he remarked to the evening gathering in his store: "Dodd ought to be kicked by a jackass; and I would like to be the one to do it."

Jim Brown, as he expressed it himself, "The commonest one of the elders," and who with Silas Warner sided with the minister, was busy in his drug store one evening directly after the interview, now the talk of most everyone, when Ralph entered.

"I'm most uncommon glad to see you, parson, seein' as how I havn't seen hide nor hair of you since the recent unpleasantness"; said Jim, as he advanced to offer a chair.

"I sincerely deplore my part in the matter, Brother Brown, and regret exceedingly the affair has occasioned so much unpleasant notoriety"; Ralph remarked as he accepted the proffered chair.

"It'll do more good than harm in the long run"; Jim smiled blandly as he said it; "Truth always does. If our friend the banker won't do good works, accordin' to our directions, we'll change his share of the medicine."

Jim smiled for a moment in a meditative way before he resumed. "Ol' Doc. Blinders used to be a number one good hoss doctor; that is, on everything except indigestion. He couldn't touch that, knew he

couldn't and said so, but he always claimed he could throw the stomach trouble into a case of Bots, an' bein' an uncommon good hand on Bots could cure the animal. The difference 'twixt us an' Blinders we don't need to throw our patient into anything. He'll do the job up first class on his own hook, an' be runnin' to us for the remedy."

"Do you really think so?" Ralph asked, amused at Jim's way of putting it.

"Think so? I know so. Just wait 'til I put the pesky cat out, I'll tell you how I know." Jim was successful in capturing the cat, and coming back to his seat on the counter, resumed; "Does a body good to let the feet dangle, seems to me I can think better. Well, Ol' Doc. Blinders invented a pill once upon a time that was a marvel of a pill. I tell you the facts just as Blinders used to tell it. The wrapper 'round the box said the pills were good for any ailment of man or beast from rheumatism to poll evil. Ol' Blinders rigged him up a wagon, geared up a team of hosses, an' started out to sell the pills. He had plenty of confidence in the things, but someway he couldn't impart his confidence to people 'long the road. 'Way down South his money played out, an' one of the hosses laid down an' died.

"An ol' planter was good to Blinders and kept him several days. Now the planter had a dog he was uncommon proud of, an' really, that dog took the place of children, there bein' none. The dog, through some misfortune, set down in a 'possum trap an' come out minus his tail. The loss of the tail bothered the man as much as the dog, which was considerable.

"Well, soon as the ol' man heard of Blinder's pills, he offered Doc. \$500 to grow a new tail on the dog. Blinders took him up quick. That night Doc. gave the dog two pills an' two next mornin'; by noon the tail had begun to sprout an' by night it was six inches

long. He gave the pills three days an' quit; the tail was gettin' to be a nusiance to the dog. The ol' planter paid the \$500 an' said he was satisfied; he'd a sight rather amputate a foot or so of tail once in awhile than have the dog without."

Ralph gave a gasp of astonishment as the narration ended. "How do you apply that?" he asked.

"Simple enough;" Jim answered; "Ol' Blinders was just mistaken about the tail. He went on an' on tellin' it over and over; no one disputed it an' the poor fellow got to believin' it was so. Even when he came to die, Parson Knox had the hardest kind of a tussle gettin' Blinders to own up. It is just so with Dodd, an' other ol' sinners like him. No one has disputed their say for so long it comes hard when it does come. Thousands of churches have the picture of their one ol' man, framed behind glass, hangin' up over the pulpit, as Dodd expected to have his here; men who did nothin' but boss an' set down on progress. When Dodd seen one-man-power goin' he collapsed."

Jim arose and crossing to where Ralph sat laid his hand impressively on his shoulder as he said: "Dodd is due to get a wakin' up. Alvia, his boy, is head over heels in bad habits. Down at the city on Saturday nights, he drinks and gambles, an' goodness knows what else. I am sorry, of course, but what can you do when the ol' fellow gets hoppin' mad when you even look straight at him?"

Ralph was grieved in heart to hear what he even before had feared. "What can we do, Jim?" he asked, and then answered: "We can try to save the boy. Try to save him—for Tommy's sake."

"Yes," Jim echoed with his lips, "for Tommy's sake. God bless her!"

CHAPTER XI

GOOD PLANS FAIL

Blender church was more prosperous than ever before in its history. The winter, while not so rigid as Ralph had been used to seeing in the North, was sufficiently severe to retard church work under natural conditions. But conditions at Blender were not natural. The impetus given the various interests of the congregation by the intense zeal and personal energy of their new pastor was such as gave little heed to weather. Under the efficient methods of systematic, proportionate giving, on a weekly basis, as outlined by the pastor and heartily followed by the people, more money was raised for the use of the church in the first three months of Ralph's work than in any previous two years. No more did the deacons prance up and down the aisles, shaking the contribution boxes under the noses of people who had forgotten to bring their money.

Far and near, in every home of the country, the pastor was a frequent and welcome visitor. They had time to listen, those simple country folk; their minds not drawn aside as the city dweller often finds his, by a thousand passing amusements of the hour.

Entering into the homelife, partaking of the pleasures, and helping and sympathizing in troubles, the opportunity offered the pastor was a wonderful one, and he improved every moment of it. Some disappointments were met with on the way, but they only served to whet the appetite for conquest, as such setbacks ever do to the man of ability and ambition.

One of the sore disappointments of the winter was

the failure of plans to save Alvia Dodd from the dissipated career he was following. For a time it appeared they would succeed, and the final reason they proved abortive, did not have its origin with Ralph and his helpers.

The pastor had taken into his confidence four of his young men and outlined to them a simple mode of procedure, which they at once entered into and carried out. Briefly it was, that each in turn should on Saturday evening invite Alvia to his home for over-night; when the young man arrived he was sure to find three others there. The carefully-planned entertainment, which bore the appearance of spontaneity to the extent that Alvia himself suggested many of them, caused the young man to forget where he would have gone.

For several weeks the Saturday night entertainment of chosen friends continued, the young men entering more and more heartily into the service, for service it certainly was. Alvia reluctantly accepted the first invitation, but no urging was needed when the second one was given. So much one of them did he become, that, with the assistance of Tommy, the best evening of all was spent in his own home. Ralph was happy as he watched with constantly growing interest the success of the attempted reformation.

How successful the social service could be was never to be fully carried out in this instance. Newton Kiel, a close-up follower of Oliver Dodd, and who hated Ralph simply because his master hated first, heard in some manner Ralph was behind the scheme. For Kiel to know a thing meant Dodd would know it as soon as it could be told.

In the banking-house on Monday morning Alvia was surprised when his father turned to him and asked, "You had a good time Saturday night, I reckon, did you, son?" There was a wicked gleam in the

father's eye as he spoke; a thing entirely unnoticed by the son.

"Yes, father, we had a fine time; the best we ever had, and at my own home, too." Then he added as an afterthought, "Sister helped out a heap. I tell you, dad, Tommy's a brick!"

"Why don't you boys put on calico dresses, wear aprons, and be girls outright?"

"Why, dad, what do you mean?"

"I mean what I say; precisely what I say. That preacher is behind the whole thing, and designs to convert everyone into a simpering mollicoddle."

The words hurt, and the boy could not prevent an injured tone creeping into his voice as he replied; "I don't know how much the preacher has to do with it, and I don't care. I do know I've had a better time than ever in my life, and feel better over it."

"Milk-toast is very good food for babies and sick folks, but a man needs something better." Mr. Dodd drew himself erect and squared his broad shoulders as he continued, "A man who expects to deal with the world needs to know something of it. Drinking tea, eating ice cream, and playing 'button, button, who's got the button,' may do for girls, but not for boys who expect to be men."

"We don't exactly do those things, but I understand what you mean, father; what would you have me do?"

"If you must play, play at men's things; face the world as a man and do as men do. The temptations our milk-sop preacher prates about are bosh—all bosh! I want you to understand, I expressly forbid you to have more to do with the preacher and his parties. The rest may do as they please. Do you hear?"

"Yes, father, I hear." In his heart Alvia felt keenly as he answered. It seemed as one asking for bread had received a stone.

In the drug store Ralph spoke out of the sorrow

of his heart when he said to Jim, "The plan was a good one, but has failed this time."

"Yes," Jim responded, throwing his half-consumed cigar in the ash-tray under the stove; "it failed this once—Ol' Dug Lewis used to get religion regular as often as a meetin' come on, an' it didn't last much longer than it took him to get it. After Dug got back from two years in the penitentiary for stealin' a span of mules, a big meetin' was goin' on at Five-Mile Point an' Dug was the first one up. Soon as Dug said he was satisfied, Parson Knox, who was runnin' the meetin', called on Deacon Emery to pray. The audience bowed an' the deacon said, 'Lord, here's ol Dug Lewis come back agin; you know all about him, an' what a unmerciful ol' sinner he is. An' now, Lord, if it suits thee, my advice is to kill him right now, an' save doin' this over anymore.' But ol' Dug wasn't killed, an' lived out three terms in jail an' died a sinner. The fault wasn't with the deacon; his plan was good, but interfered with."

"An'," Jim reflectively added, "your plan was bothered. When a man gets scared or mad he has a badly exaggerated view of things an' wrong every pop. Did I ever tell you 'bout the time Harris Bromwell an' Lincoln Swift went over Crum's Pass to spellin' school?"

"I believe not," Ralph answered, wondering what philosophy would be applied to the problem in hand.

"It was a cloudy night an' pitch dark when they started out, Lincoln on a hoss an' Harris ridin' a mule. They'd just got even with the big oak, near the lower end of the pass, when somethin' reared up in front of them an' seemed to grab the mule by his head; all they could tell was the thing was white. It was an ol' blind goat turned out to die, but they didn't know."

"The mule gave a snort, as nothin' but a mule can, jumped sideways, an' left Harris on his back in the

road. Lincoln rode like all possessed right past the spellin' school an' ended up at Dover nine miles further. He told the people a bear had killed the mule, and was eatin' Harris when he left.

"Harris didn't lose any time makin' for the tree and climbed it, or rather, thought he did. He told afterward the ol' bear chased him plum to the top, an' he kicked it loose with his heels. Harris called on the Lord to send help—a thing he wasn't nowise used to doin'—an' to send it on hoss-back. Of course the mule came home, minus his bridle, an' in fifteen minutes two of the boys were out at the tree with a lantern. Harris was makin' noise enough to wake the dead, an' the searchers had no trouble findin' him. When they inquired the cause of the trouble, Harris said a bear had eaten Lincoln an' kept him up the tree all night. When they urged him to come an' get on his mule he said, 'I can't—I can't get down over this bump.' The lantern showed Harris was a-settin' on the ground, with legs and arms wrapped 'round the tree trunk, holdin' on for dear life. The ol' goat was standin' off in the road, eatin' his hat."

Jim attended to the needs of a customer, then returning to the subject, finished: "Harris was scared; Dodd is mad, an' he has as little sense in his way as Harris had in his. Any fool can reform when he has to, but a wise man will do it first. I've heard somewhere, I guess it's old news, as how the mills of the gods don't grind very fast, but grind mighty fine—exceedin' fine. I'm wonderin' what pleasure Dodd will get out of it when he is ground up in exceedin' small chunks."

CHAPTER XII

PICNIC AT ROARING SPRING

A pretty day, everybody thought, and such a splendid one for a picnic, everybody said, as from a dozen roads in as many directions the teams came, drawing their loads of merry, chattering, old and young, turned into the narrow lane and presently drew up at Roaring Spring.

The spring had been for years the favorite for picnic and camping expeditions and it was only the natural thing it should be selected for to-day. It was a new experience for Blender church people this picnic, but of late they were reveling in things new.

It was a happy thought of the pastor, this late date in April, the labor of early spring over, and that of long summer not yet begun to have his people take a day off and go to the woods.

Once there it was difficult to tell where the children left off and grown people commenced. The men, led by Ralph, had as much fun in putting up the swings as the boys and girls did in using them. The girls of yesterday gave illustration to the girls of to-day of how rope-skipping used to be done, to the hilarious delight of the little ones. The cool water of the spring-fed stream running away to the valley proved a delightful place to wade, and the children made good use of the opportunity. Twenty-four separate times before noon, Silas Warner broke into groups where conversation was carried on to inquire when dinner would be ready.

"I don't care for myself," he would explain, "but the children and the preacher will get hungry."

A care-free crowd it was, for the time, at least; and on many a hot summer afternoon, farmers resting their horses at the end of long corn rows, would smile at the recollection as their thought went back to the day.

The far side of the little stream formed by the great spring, as it ran from north to south, the picnic ground to the east, was a high line of bluffs. High up on the bluff and a possible one-half mile below the spring Roaring Cave was situated. The name was bestowed as an honor to the spring, and was misleading to some people who visited it in hope of hearing that which the name implied. It was a deep, quiet, cool cavern running back in the hills for a distance no one knew. Parties traversing its corridors came to a place, probably a mile from the entrance, where the path ends on the brink of a precipice so deep the bottom had not been told. No explorer had ever gone beyond.

Setting out alone, the idea in mind to visit the mouth of the cave, Ralph came at length to a place where the waters of Roaring Spring pushed, and twisted, and foamed their way in and about the roots of a giant sycamore. A row of huge stepping stones marked the way across stream, while, from the opposite bank, straightway up the steep hillside, ran a path to the mouth of the cave.

"Allan of the Sycamore!" The thought came into his mind and unconsciously he spoke it aloud.

"I wonder if this could be the Sycamore? It fills the description. And the cave—perhaps he lives there." His eyes searched the branches of the great tree, many of them a hundred or more feet above the ground, as though the answer could be read there.

"Are you preaching to the tree, Brother Glenwood?" A girlish voice broke in on his thoughts.

"Oh! its you Alice? I was only thinking."

"Do you do all you serious thinking aloud?"

"No, I have at least one serious thought not yet spoken out loud. I have been thinking how much better it would sound to me to have you call me Ralph."

"Very well"; with a demure little bow she said it; "Ralph it shall be."

Pointing with his hand to the hills, over which an abundance of green-robed trees grew, with myriad flowers lifting their sweet glory to them, Ralph asked; "Is it not beautiful? Spring is a grand time!"

"Yes, I love the spring-time, with its budding flowers, bright sunlight, and pretty birds, but then I love the whole year. When each season comes I think I love it best. I care for winter because it is useful. The growing world must rest and winter is resting time. Everything is useful—everything but me."

"Why—I am sure"; Ralph would have spoken, but she detained him.

"No, don't try to make excuses for me, Ralph"; the name had a sweet sound to the man as it fell from her lips. "I don't deserve it, and they would not be true. You have your work and you are doing it well; other men have their chosen rut in which ambition runs, but woman's part is not so. The life of a woman means to love and be loved, without either she is miserable. I do not mean that to love, to be loved, to have one's soul knit in love to home and to children, as my own mother has, is not worth while. Please don't believe me so ungrateful a wretch. I only mean a woman sometimes longs to do things in the world on her own responsibility. Things of importance."

Ralph ground a shell at his feet into the sand as he replied: "Woman has been directly responsible

for nine-tenths of all good things ever accomplished in this world. It is love that impels great service in man. The king on his throne, the merchant in his business, or farmer on his land, strives harder because of the one love he would honor. Who is more entitled to praise, he who does, or she who moves to do?

"It is only lately I have known these things. I know now, the rich reward obtained of God is all the richer, shared with another, and without that other, the reward may endure for eternity, but waste much of its richness on selfish self—a self that cannot utilize it all.

"You just said winter is resting time. If, without it, the flowers and trees of our climate cannot do so well, how much less, then, can man do without a resting place? Woman is truly a summer of beauty and plenty to a manly man, but there is a truer sense in which she is a winter. Not a winter of discontent, but one of restfulness."

For some moments, when Ralph had finished speaking, they stood in silence. The man busied himself in tossing pebbles into the stream, and the woman, finding no better thing to do, employed herself in twisting her parasol from one hand to the other. When a crisis comes in a life it seldom ever gives a noisy warning in advance. Both felt the crisis. Alice knew her complaint had been well answered, and her womanly sense told her the man was speaking of that which he felt. Ralph felt he had plenty to say, but search as he would, could not find suitable words to continue.

Ralph was the first to break the silence, which he did in painstaking deliberation. The pebbles remaining in his hand were dropped to the ground; cravat adjusted around the collar which now felt a size too small; coat straightened over the shoulders,

and from the pocket a handkerchief produced with which he mopped his forehead; carefully folded it was returned to his pocket. With a twinkle in her eye Alice watched the maneuvers; it was possible she didn't understand the importance of them. All done he cleared his throat and asked:

"Alice, do you—you know what love means?"

Alice was naturally confused by the question, but made answer in a low firm voice; "Yes, Ralph, I know what true love is, or, I—I think I know. I know what my heart tells me. My soul would endure suffering—anything, for the one I loved!"

The answer took Ralph's breath away. "I believe you," he muttered, and stooping he pressed his lips to her hair.

Alice, with an affrighted movement, stepped away, and was about to speak, when both discovered, at about the same instant, the presence of Tommy Dodd. "I—I—hope I don't intrude?" she said.

"Not at all"; both tried to say at once, but each made a dismal failure in the saying.

The conversation the three tried to carry on was not a brilliant one, and directly all steps led back to the picnic.

It struck Ralph as strange, that his thoughts in going, as in coming, were about Allan of the Sycamore.

CHAPTER XIII

ON THE MOUNTAIN TOP

"I want to thank you, Brother Glenwood, for the great blessing you have been to me, and to the community." Mr. Dwight laid aside his violin as he spoke and turned his chair toward the window.

"I have tried to do my duty, Mr. Dwight, and of course, if I have succeeded in a measure, I am thankful."

"You have done more than the common run of ministers call duty. Mr. Dempster was an illustration. He was a fine man, a first-rate sermonizer, and pretty fair at shaking hands, but that was the extent of his help. To preach on Sunday, attend the Wednesday night service, and officiate at a funeral or wedding, was the understanding he had of service. There was but one brand of sympathy on tap in his heart; a brand expressed by a broad smile; and turned loose on all occasions.

"When a preacher can get a boy to copy his dress after him he has an undoubted hold on that boy. Whenever you change neckties, Ralph, every boy between here and Little Turtle Creek does the same."

Ralph blushed with pleasure at the compliment as he spoke. "I am afraid you flatter my work, Mr. Dwight."

"I only wish I could flatter, and only wish I knew all of it that I might try. Widow Alexander was here yesterday and told how you tramped through the mud last January, carrying that sack of flour every foot of seven miles, when her boy lay sick and her hungry. That act made Christians of two neighbors of hers, as mean men as lived in the country."

"It was little to do," said Ralph, "but I am glad the results were so good."

"The little things loom large in God's kingdom, Ralph. Some of the big things we confidently expect to see won't be there. You've helped us see ourselves here at Blender, and things that count are being done. Just a few are standing off, but in God's own good time, they, too, shall see."

"We have not lost hope for them yet, and don't expect to give them up." As he spoke Ralph thought of Dodd.

"I started out to thank you especially for myself. When a man finds himself at my age, bothered by a thousand demons of hate, and knowing they'll be the ruination of his soul if they triumph, I tell you the help of a friend is like oxidized air to the nostrils of a dying man. I remember the past and shall so long as memory holds, but now for the first time in my life since it all happened, the iron has gone out of my soul, the bitterness out of my heart and I am happy. Ralph, if I live to see the day after to-morrow, which will be God's day, I intend to go down to Oliver Dodd's house and tell him I forgive him."

"Thank God!" Ralph fervently uttered. "It's a noble thing to do, Mr. Dwight, and you will be blest."

"I have had a thousand blessings even now. You have helped me to the place of blessing and I thank you."

"You are heartily welcome to my friendship," Ralph replied, "for if I have helped it has been as a friend. I only wish I could ease the ragged edges of the memory."

The next remark of Mr. Dwight was so much in the nature of a surprise that Ralph was startled almost to the point of falling off his chair. "I don't find any fault with you as a friend, my boy, and consider you

need just one thing to round you out—finish you up, as it were—you ought to be married."

When he had gained control in a measure of himself, Ralph answered, "Yes, I know it. I mean to—I—mean to in the fulness of time."

"Of course," continued Mr. Dwight, taking no notice of his companion's discomfort, "love is the first essential thing. No life is complete without it, and while it may sometimes bring pain the thousand pleasures make amends."

"I have a pretty good start, I don't mind telling you, on the first essential thing." When Mr. Dwight looked at Ralph he was blushing.

"And does your heart sometimes just rise right up and talk to you, and in her presence does it seem inclined to get out and walk on occasions?"

"I don't know but you have described the feeling somewhat accurately."

"Those are prominent symptoms, and hold good at eighteen or fifty-five years alike. I am sure you'll do your part in any union. Certainly the future mistress Glenwood is to be congratulated on her judgment and good taste."

"The future mistress, if I may call her such, does not know, and I have small idea of her feeling."

"Why don't you ask her?"

"I don't have much idea what her parents would think."

"Nonsense! There isn't a father or mother within twenty miles of Blender but would be honored."

"Do you think her father would consent to my wooing her?"

"Well, coming down to an individual case, circumstances alter cases. Who is the girl?"

"The girl is Alice."

"My answer, son, is my hand. I had Dodd in mind."

Times come in experiences of most men when the clasp of a hand is more eloquent than words. It was such a time now, as Ralph and Mr. Dwight stood hand in hand, the eyes of each bedimmed with tears.

Far into the night Mr. Dwight told out to the stars the new-found peace and joy of his heart. The people of the village heard the glad music and many a "God bless Mr. Dwight! Bless his violin!" went out from uplifted hearts.

Off Roaring Spring way, a whip-poor-will calls to his mate. One who ever sees and never forgets listens to the waters as they talk.

CHAPTER XIV

"MY DREAM IS OVER"

Methodical to exactness in her housekeeping was Mrs. Dwight. Monday was washday, Tuesday reserved for ironing, and each following day had its work religiously done. No matter how tired, nor how much Mr. Dwight protested, nothing, the duty of one day, was permitted to rob the privileges of the morrow. Many nights were largely consumed in living up to her ideal; however, Mrs. Dwight was happy.

Other women in Blender, having the same idea of practical method, could be induced to stop on Saturday evening, looking forward in quiet to Sunday. Saturday was always finish up day to the Mistress on the hill. "The finish always makes or mars a work," she often remarked. Slight chance her work should be marred by a poor finish.

Alice had learned the art of good house-care under such a tutor, and during the school vacations had borne much of the conflict against untidiness. The mother was proud, a matter of course; her daughter should be useful. She gave more thought to this than to the rest she obtained.

The Saturday finish was progressing nicely as from room to room Alice plied broom and duster. From chair to chair around the library Mr. Dwight moved with his book, as a rug here, now there, received the attention of his daughter's broom. The last speck of dust from the last piece of furniture removed, Alice was quitting the room when her father spoke.

"My daughter, I want you to know how happy

I am. When an old man like me gets exceeding happy he must tell it. More years than lots of people can remember a cloud, of which I cannot tell you just yet, has hung over my soul. It is gone now, and I am so glad." Happy tears stood in the father's eyes as he talked.

Alice threw broom and dustpan to the floor, unmindful of the litter made, as she threw her arms around Mr. Dwight's neck and whispered in his ear. "Papa, I am glad! Anything that makes you happy ought to make me glad, 'cause I love you."

Lightly stroking the soft, golden hair as he spoke, Mr. Dwight said: "I am proud of my girlie, and glad to own her affections. My daughter the heart of a Dwight was ever meant for love. To love once, means love always. Your old father came nearest breaking over the rule, but his poor heart has paid a million times. You shall know someday—not now."

"Papa, I have a confession to make." Hiding her face on his shoulder she hesitantly continued: "I, too, am happy and glad. I am—I am in love with another man than you."

"Yes, daughter, I know something about it, tell me more."

The girl was amazed at the statement, and wondered if her actions had told the secret, or had he been to visit her father. The latter she seriously doubted. A vague uneasiness in heart, she went on to tell: "I—I don't exactly know how to explain—it's all so different from the way I love you. Little by little it has grown on me, until now it possesses my heart and soul every moment of the time. You know how it is, papa, better than I can say. A love that is for eternity is not easily described. He has been a little wild, but that will end."

"A little wild!" It was the father astounded now. What did it mean? The uneasiness was transferred to his own heart as he asked:

"Whom do you mean?"

"Alvia Dodd, papa."

"Oh! my Master! Why didn't I know?"

Alice sprang to her feet in alarm, Mr. Dwight had fainted. Thoroughly frightened, and wondering what she had done, her first impulse was to call her mother. Remembering she was not at home, Alice hastily secured water and a bottle of camphor, and with but faint idea of what she was doing, attempted to restore life. However much or little she helped Mr. Dwight soon opened his eyes and in a dazed way looked about him.

"Please," in a low voice he pleaded; "My violin."

Her voice showing the earnest solicitude she felt, Alice asked, as she granted his request; "Are you better, now?"

"Yes, little girlie, better now. Sit down and let me talk. It will be better so."

Alice drew a chair near and listened as the man talked on. He told her the story of his life in every detail, and the part Oliver Dodd played in it. The years' long struggle against hate, and the newly acquired victory, he pictured. Ever as he talked the violin kept company. It was a strange mixture of tragedy and pathos, of defeat and victory, the girl heard, hardly able to tell whether man or violin told it best.

Ralph heard the music as he entered the house by a rear door, and he pursued his way upstairs, his whole being saddened, in a way he could not account for.

The story finished, in a maze of melody that hinted of a requiem for hope, the pale-faced player dropped the bow.

"Its in the blood, girlye; they're not worthy of a woman's trust. 'Twas all my fault. Alice—tell me, you forgive your father!"

The girl had listened to the revelation with constantly changing feeling, in which a nameless fear and sorrow predominated. Now throwing her sob-shaken body at the feet of Mr. Dwight, clasping with her hands his knees, she cried out: "Forgive you, papa? There is nothing—nothing to forgive. It's as much my fault as yours. I—I don't know what to say—what to do. I must think! Give me time to think!" Arising, her face covered in her hands, Alice went to her room.

For a long while the father sat in stillness, thinking of the abiding love of a Dwight.

The hour marking the boundary between the Saturday night and the beginning of Sabbath had almost come, as the bent figure of a man grown old, picked his way over long forgotten paths, and stood in the shadow of a deserted log-cabin. The rolling waters of Honey Creek came through the shadows and their music fell, unheeded, on deadened ears.

A thousand memories of dead past lingered in the mind; and as well unnoticed, the nodding heads of hollyhock, which through years of brier-choked existence, remained to mock. Glad hopes had nourished the birth of them, and proud acclaim their merit won, in mutual fruition. Held dear to remembrance every foot of the forsaken ground was gone over as the man stood; every syllable of the heart cry for its absent mate was heard again, as the flesh recoiled from the pain.

Sweet-voiced birds of the night chirped their songs of praise, as when of old a man and woman sat in audience, in the gloaming, hopes high and

love alluring. Life was young then, and the roadway easy.

From where the rolling waters came in constant sound the night claimed another wanderer. The form was slight and agile. Neither young nor old in years was the man, his alert sense and quickened steps ever on guard as he moved. Never long in one place, the man, with restless mien, journeyed at a distance round and round the brush grown lot. With eyes that see, and determined never to forget, he keeps lonely vigil over the one in the shadow of the cabin.

The old man removed his hat as he turned away, his lips moving as in prayer. "My Father," he muttered; "Thou who carest even when the sparrow falls to the ground, help me! My dream is over!" So saying, he followed the trail back home.

CHAPTER XV

"I WISH YOU WERE DEAD!"

When Tommy returned that day from the picnic she was far from happy. She knew now the growing care she had for Ralph was love. The brief instant she stood witnessing the scene between the two at the Sycamore revealed it to her.

When the new preacher came and began to develop his plans the reception they met with from her was one of desire to help. That her help was second to none in value Ralph often recalled. This determination was combatted by Mr. Dodd with much vehemence, and in the first few months by a vast amount of loud, drawn-out argument. These angry denunciations of the minister the girl answered with calmness and precision much beyond her years. So artful at times was the girl in defending the pastor, that Mr. Dodd admitted his defeat by abruptly leaving the room, in more haste than good grace. As time went on Mr. Dodd contented himself with an occasional sneering remark, directed at church or preacher, but said no more.

When Ralph's plans to help her brother fell through, Tommy was sick at heart. She knew better than anyone else how much the help was needed, and when its successful issue began to show in Alvia's face and conduct she was pleased. The reaction following the father's interference she had seen with sinking spirit. Alvia was going down the wrong way rapidly, and she knew it.

Kindly, sisterly, she remonstrated with him regarding his conduct. Many times she evoked the memory of his mother, thinking that would touch

his heart and move him to better things. Efforts of every kind were alike unavailing, even the last brought only a momentary tear of repentance. When Mr. Dodd was approached on the subject he showed his utter lack of care by telling the girl to attend to her own business, and let Alvia alone. "He'll get through sowing the oats some of these days and settle down," Mr. Dodd added, noting the sad look on his daughter's face.

Tommy knew of her inherent good sense there would be a crop to reap even if he did settle down. A crop he could just as well exist without, and far more happy. However, she held her peace, knowing full well a dispute with her father could do nothing toward helping Alvia.

Since Tommy had arrived at Blender, Alice had been her bosom friend. In school and out they were together, many tastes in common attracting each to the other. A confidant of Alice, as she always was, Tommy knew the hold Alvia had on her heart. She also knew Alvia looked with as much favor on her friend as he was capable of, considering his unsettled life.

There was a time when Tommy had high hopes that Alice could, and would, lead her brother back to right living. Crestfallen all such hopes, she was forced to admit, where there is lack of respect for mother and sister, not much can be expected for any other woman.

It was of Alice she thought now as she inclined her tired body on a sofa at home. "How much better," she thought; "a life with a man like Glenwood than with Alvia. Glenwood is all Alvia is not and one any woman could desire. I wish I had never seen him. Even now, I could give up all care for him if Alice can be saved. I wish, O, I wish I hadn't gone to the Sycamore!"

Tommy was rapidly developing a case of "blues" when the door opened and Alvia came striding in.

"Hello! Sis," he greeted Tommy, throwing himself heavily into a chair; "How was the picnic?"

"We had a good time; that is, most everyone did, but I am tired." Tommy did not rise.

"Was Alice there?"

"Yes."

For some moments neither spoke. In the silence Tommy noticed anew, with a pang at her heart strings, the heavy lines drink had left on her brother's otherwise fine, youthful face; it seemed to her he looked worse daily. She was first to break the silence.

"What is your intention, Alvia, regarding Alice?"

The question was an unwelcome one to the young man, and it showed in his actions as he answered: "I'm not sure—I suppose I'll marry her when I get ready. Goodness knows she'd marry soon enough."

"Your answer," retorted Tommy, "is an insult to her and to all womankind. If she married you at all it would be because you were the only one to her."

"No insult intended, Tommy, I'm sure." The action attending the answer was insolent.

Not noticing her brother's behavior Tommy's next question was pleading. "Why don't you leave Alice alone?"

"Why should I?"

"Alvia, you are not fit to be husband to such a woman, and you know you are not. I—I happen to know, Mr. Glenwood thinks well of her, and if you keep out of the road——"

"Who appointed you her guardian, and made you sponsor for long-face?" Long-face was his favorite name for Ralph.

"Every true hearted woman is always guardian for another when her happiness is at stake. Mr. Glenwood needs no sponsor."

"Why don't you claim the parson for yourself, you know his virtues so well?" Tommy attempted no answer to the question. It seemed too close a one.

"I won't back down," Alvia said, rising to his feet as he spoke, "for all the long-faces in the world. I'll show you and I'll show your parson!"

"Do you care enough for Alice to marry her?"

"Care for her? It could be more, and it could be less. I say I'll marry her, and I will."

"And break her heart."

"All bosh, this matter of broken hearts. I don't care if I do break her heart; I'll show you all."

For a dramatic instant brother and sister confronted each other. Tommy's thoughts were flying fast. She had sought to aid her friend, an aid she was by no means sure the friend would appreciate, and only succeeded in making bad matters worse. A look into the future made her afraid, and she shuddered, trying to shut out the sight with her hands. The mean smile of triumph on the brother's face mocked her and goaded to exasperation. When Tommy spoke it was as a matter deliberated over until an undoubted conclusion is arrived at. Each word came plain, distinctly separate, and fell with a sting on the senses as she spoke the sentence.

"Alvia, I wish you were dead!"

He made no answer as the door slammed shut behind him.

Tommy tossed on a sleepless bed most of the night, as she time and again asked herself if she had done right in trying at least to help Alice. Sometimes the thought came in on her, the price would

be greater than she could pay, should it come to pass.

Below stairs Oliver Dodd walked up and down the floor of his library. He was thinking seriously, his brows knotted darkly. Only to-day he had heard reports from the city regarding his son that turned careless indifference into thoughtful solicitude. Often his thoughts included that interview, held with the new preacher in this very room, and he remembered it all. The test had come. Should he call in the officers?"

Away in the city Alvia was making the night hideous with drunken debauchery.

CHAPTER XVI

BACK IN THE VALLEY

With a sense of reflected sunlight falling on his face Ralph awakened. "It is Sunday," he thought, the first thing on his mind, as it had been the last before falling asleep, "and to-day Mr. Dwight goes to ask Dodd's pardon."

What a morning it was outdoors! The great hills reflected onward the morning sun, and a million dew sparkles on the grass sought to imitate the hills. Tinkling of tiny bells, gently shaken by cattle as they fed on the tender hillside grass, wafted to the hearing on invigorating early air, made pleasure complete.

Mr. Dwight did not appear at breakfast. Mrs. Dwight said he was up late and wouldn't be down. Alice had little to say and Ralph, looking on her pale face, wondered. Mrs. Dwight seemed ill at ease and several times returned wrong answers to Ralph's questions. Altogether, Ralph felt the late morning was as much a failure as the early part had been a success, and was truly glad when he could get away for a walk in the woods.

Winding paths in the deep, refreshing forests about Blender furnished something of a place to walk and meditate. Ralph was used to using them, many of his best sermons having their beginning here. This morning the long avenues of trees were more welcome than usual. He wanted to be away alone for a time to think. It seemed a thing too good to be true that, after long years of doubt, perplexity and struggle, the cloud had lifted from Mr. Dwight. He was proud of the part in it belonging

to him. Many victories at Blender had crowned the efforts of the pastor, but they appeared dross when matched with this one.

Of Alice, too, his thoughts were. True, she had stepped away from the pressure of his lips on her hair at the picnic. Perhaps he had been in too great haste. Recounting the many acts of kindness done for him, her manner in his presence, and friendly deference to his opinions, Ralph concluded she cared. The conclusion made him happy, and squirrels, alarmed at his singing, scurried to their nests, while birds overhead swelled their little throats all the greater.

Dignified people would have been dumbfounded at the spectacle of their pastor under the trees running, skipping, jumping as a child.

"I suppose—I—reckon—what I mean is—that is to say, you will preach all the better for the exercise, I guess." The speaker was Silas Warner, standing not over twenty feet distant.

A much-abashed preacher came to stand at the side of an oak, gasped a time or two, and said; "I beg your pardon, Silas, I don't do such capers as a regular thing."

"No, I reckon not," Silas laughingly rejoined. "If you did they'd have you in some safe place of confinement. However, I won't tell Mr. Dodd, nor the rest of the session."

"I am thankful to you. I didn't know you ever indulged in rambles through the woods, Silas."

"I don't except when I'm lonesome. I somehow felt out of sorts this morning, and longed for a walk; it has helped me wonderfully. Of course, there's something in the day that does it."

"Let us lie down on the grass and you tell me your troubles," Ralph urged, his quick sympathy aroused.

Prone on the soft green carpet they lay and Silas began. "So many people have troubles to tell I hate

to bother with mine. That's the main reason it's never been told you. Another thing, it's so old it can't do any good to tell it.

"To-day is my son's birthday anniversary. Thirty-eight years ago to-day he was born, and if alive would be that old. Quite a man, you see. We were living out in Kansas then, and prospering. My! I tell you we were proud of that baby—maybe that's one reason he was taken away. When he got big enough to talk the little shaver wouldn't go to bed at night until I rode him on my back, and tucked him in.

"One day, the summer he was six years old, my wife came running to the field all out of breath, white as death, and told me the boy was gone. We never found a single trace of him. Some gipsy wagons had stopped near by us, but we found them. They didn't have him, and if they knew anything about it, we couldn't get the truth out of them.

"I took my wife to her father and off and on for about fourteen years I searched, part of the time as a tramp, not by choice but from necessity. Never but one little clue did I find, and nothing ever came of it. An old gipsy told me once, a little boy who answered the description of mine, in a wagon which joined his, from where he did not know, was kicked on the head by a horse and left at a farm-house to die. I couldn't find the farm-house, but I found the neighborhood he spoke about.

"People whose folks are dead know where their bodies are. It's an awful thing for a father not to know whether his boy lives or not; to guess whether he has plenty or is in need. The rough edge of the hurt is gone, but once in a while I just can't help wanting my boy, and wondering where he is."

"I am sure your experience has been and is most trying. You have my deepest sympathy." The hand

Ralph extended to Silas, in the nature of its clasp, left no doubt of true fellowship in suffering.

Service hour at the church rapidly approaching, the two friends arose from the ground and walked briskly away, talking as they went. At the entrance of the churchyard, not recalling that Silas had spoken the name, Ralph asked, "What did you name your boy?"

"We called him Allan," Silas answered. Ralph started as the name fell on his ears, but coming to a group of people entering church no more was said.

Ascending the pulpit steps Tommy was there with the hymn selections for the service. The pastor had rather expected, he couldn't just explain why, she would avoid him. The fact she did no such thing contributed vastly to the success of the sermon. The walls of Blender Church had echoed many good sermons, both in other days and with other preachers—and now, but if a sermon ever so moved the people as the one of to-day all had forgotten. The subject was "Forgiving," the argument taken from the teaching of The Christ. The preacher pictured in words that glowed with warmth the condition of an unforgiving spirit. The struggle one sometimes has was set out in such a way that those who listened felt they were hearing the experience of the man who spoke. They could not know it was the life-story of Casper Dwight—the preacher himself was hardly conscious of it, but even so. Men wept when the splendid glory of self-conquered was revealed, and later moved from their seats in exuberance of feeling, beholding as one through a clear glass the Father's crown of righteousness, to him who overcomes.

Many hearts were touched by that sermon and moved to good deeds. A dozen or more old scores dated their settlement from the time Preacher Glenwood talked on forgiving.

Other surprises the audience was aware of that morning, over and above the sermon.

Casper Dwight was not at church and Oliver Dodd was.

Ralph was immensely pleased to see Mr. Dodd in the audience, the first time he had entered the house since the opening Sunday. He was more highly pleased at close of services when the banker walked up and shook hands.

"I don't remember bein' so surprised since we killed out the bumblebees' nest when I was a boy," Jim Brown remarked out under the trees.

"How was that?" someone inquired.

"We had run across a whoppin' big nest of the bees an' boy-like concluded to whip 'em out. One of the boys suggested a shingle was a new and good way to fight bumblebees. It fell to my lot to wield the shingle. Another boy poked over their nest in the ground with a stick an' out they come. There was only room for one at a time to get out an' I would fetch him zip with the shingle.

"Well, I let one get away, or failed to zip him hard enough. Those bees in one-half minute were out of the hole, an' stingin' me through my sun-burned hair. It was desperately interestin' while it lasted. Unreasonable as it may seem, we were expecting to happen just what did happen, an' enjoyed a surprise when it come. I have knowed all along Dodd would come back, but am surprised just the same."

For himself Dodd offered no explanation, and at close of morning service returned home. Taking it for granted Mr. Dwight's absence was caused by some slight illness, beyond remarking his absence, nothing was said of him. Ralph ended the day as he had begun it, in the woods. The quaint comment of Jim Brown passed time quickly. Observing the day was

far spent, at length the friends parted, and Ralph returned home.

Dusk had given place to dark of night, illumed by the newly-risen moon, when Ralph reached the house, where at the door Mr. Dwight met him. The old gentleman said nothing in response to salutation and continued in silence as he followed upstairs and into the pastor's room. He stood nervously fumbling the back of a chair as a light was struck.

"I didn't ask Dodd's pardon to-day," he said, as Ralph finished adjusting the lamp wick, and turned about. Puzzled what to say, he finally managed to ask, "Why?"

"I'll spare you the reasons why, my boy, and satisfy myself with telling you the old demon has come back. My victory was short-lived. The struggle must be gone over again, and once more I crave your help."

"Then you won't ask Dodd's pardon?" Hardly knowing what he said, Ralph asked.

"No, I will not ask it! I'll be damned first!" The words came as an explosion, and with a dexterity out of keeping with his years, Mr. Dwight turned and bounded down the stairs.

Pondering the strange ending of what he had taken so much joy in, Ralph sat for considerable time. Figure it from every viewpoint he would, the matter remained a puzzle. That something had happened was plain, something Mr. Dwight did not care to tell, even in the ears of so good a friend. Reaching for his Bible Ralph discovered its absence, and recalled leaving it on the pulpit at church. Noting the time of night, he extinguished the light and going quietly outdoors, went for the book.

CHAPTER XVII

IT CAN BE DONE IF YOU WILL

When the first hour of intense sorrow her father's story brought her was ended Alice had formed a resolution. The two loves of her heart, as she had tried to tell her father, were not alike. Set in opposition as they now were the effect can be imagined.

Alice knew what she chose to term, the wild life Alvia indulged in, and feared it. When these fears were at their worst, as on occasions they would be, Alvia seemed to know and right well he knew how to calm them. At such times Alice secretly rejoiced in the power of her love and dreamed for days of her ideal.

Often the girl admitted to herself the new minister came a great deal nearer fitting her ideal than did her lover. Even when he could no longer be called exactly new the same thoughts came to her. So nearly as she could tell her feeling toward him, Alice looked on Ralph with respect and admiration. That he should care for her in a special sense was a thought never entertained. That is to say, never entertained, until the moment she felt his kiss on her hair, as they stood under the Sycamore. The slight caress sent a thrill of pleasure to her own heart, and she had discovered his love.

To Alice the discovery brought pain. Her generous nature shrank from inflicting pain and she knew her own heart affairs would not permit of encouragement. She had in mind to say something, allowing him to see how the land lay, when the appearance of Tommy prevented.

The resolution arrived at was a hard one to carry out Alice knew only too well. To tell the man she loved the story involving his own father, as she had heard it, was no light task. To tell him the price of her love was emphatically his own reformation, and until this was accomplished, she must and would, refuse to marry him, or even see him, was heavier still.

Alvia's exultation was patent to Tommy when she delivered the message from Alice to him, asking him to come to the entrance of the church yard at sundown.

"It don't seem she takes the stock in the parson you do, else she would invite him for company."

Tommy paid no spoken attention to the remark.

Alice, impatiently at the gate, had been for thirty minutes watching the light die out in the West when Alvia sauntering carelessly up the path joined her.

"Why so sad?" he questioned. "Afraid I wasn't coming?"

"I knew you would come," Alice answered, evading an offered pat of the hand on her shoulder. "I have something to say to you, Alvia, and it is not easy to say."

"Not another temperance lecture I hope."

"No, only something that has happened and another something I hope will happen."

Leaning her weight on the gate, a pale face raised toward the moon, Alice told her story. It was hard at first; later the words crowded one another in their haste. Hesitating only for a moment now and then she persevered to the very end. She did not mince words in any sense regarding Mr. Dodd.

A moment the man stood absently kicking the gate post before uttering a single sentence.

"The old scoundrel!" he said.

"But, Alvia," the girl caught her breath with a low sob of anguish, "that part was hard to tell, but not so hard as the rest."

Alvia made a move to interrupt, but desisted, as the girl went on. "I love you, Alvia—God knows how much! Father says it's in your blood. I don't want to believe it—I won't believe—not—not—until I have to. Until you can—and will—come to me with clean hands and pure heart, I cannot be your wife. More, I shall absolutely refuse to see you after to-night until the time comes, if it ever does, when the man in you shall assert itself. We must say goodbye now."

"No—no—Alice—listen to me first!" a trembling hand sought hers unsuccessfully, as he spoke. "I see it all! Glenwood's hand is in this business. You shall be my wife." Cowering on his knees at her feet he concluded the sentence and went on; "I am not to blame. I've just growed up for all the world like a great big no-account weed. You and Tommy are the only ones who ever cared; father didn't and doesn't now. Nothing would suit him better than to see me in jail for keeps."

"When I stay away from the boys in town I'm all right; they urge me and I drink, and then I don't know nor care what is done. When I try to hold back it seems all the power of hell is pulling at me. I wouldn't wonder your father's right. It's in the blood! God! it's in the blood! If you let me go I am lost. You cannot—you will not! Alice, tell me you won't cast me off!"

Sobs heavily shook the form as Alvia arose from the ground and searched the face of Alice appealingly. Her own tears were dried now, the white face calm and immovable. With no trace of emotion she spoke: "I have never said I would cast

you off. I have only said I will not get down in the mire with you. You are to have a man's chance. It can be done if you will."

"Then, there is no one else?" he asked.

"There is no one else, Alvia, nor room in my heart for another. Whether you rise or fall I am yours, but never to possess unless you rise. My love is for you, as changeless as eternal time. I love you—always you—and—and—nobody else. Please don't come to me again, only on the conditions I have said. Goodbye." She was gone. Alvia stood stupidly, trying to think for a moment, and in turn left the spot.

A third party, unobserved in the shadow of an elm tree near, heard the concluding sentences of the answer Alice made. It was Ralph coming for his Bible. From a distance the figures in the moonlight had been seen with only a passing wonder as to their identity. Entering into the shadow of the tree he recognized the voice of Alice, and the form of her companion. A brief instant he stopped while there came the sound of her voice—"I love you—always you—and—and—nobody else." Dazed by what his ears had heard, his heart too numb to feel just yet, without thought, and only desiring to get away from the place of torture, Ralph's undirected footsteps lay toward the woods. Far in the interior he stopped, his feet straying from the bare path into leaves at the side. Slits of light struck the ground in places, much as a candle gleam, shining through a door slightly ajar, marks a streak across the floor. This small light served to intensify the pitch-darkness about. Prostrate in the leaves Ralph fell and lay without sound or moan, his great heart crushed. Probably an hour he lay fighting the battle.

Then victory came, and he arose to his feet

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muttering, "I will be a man! Whew!—but it hurts to do right. My duty is plain. I must help—help her and Alvia. Ah! Glenwood, your cross will be hard to bear, but not such as Mr. Dwight and Silas have borne."

Eager now to return to Blender, when Ralph would have been on his way, he was forced to admit himself lost. To and fro, up and down, he sought the path. The darkness, so welcome at first, was become a barrier now, as no outlet appeared.

Stumbling onward in the dark, his feet ever seeking the path, Ralph was beginning to figure on spending the night under the trees, when voices came to his ears. They were not far away and seemed to be forming some kind of plan.

"Hain't you got sense enough to know, we'uns don't dast go to Blender?"

"I kaint figur' no cause."

"They'd cop us'ns in less'n ten minutes, an' jug fer ours."

"When you calculate on doin' the job?"

Ralph bent forward and listened intently as the first voice he had heard answered:

"T'ursday night. Did you put the soap an' 'Nitro' where I done tol' you?"

"B'en there t'reedays now. Does old Dodd keep much green-back on hand?"

"He keeps a plenty, if we kin git it. See you do your'n part."

"Bout the kid."

"What 'bout the kid?"

"Won't he give we'uns away? Kin we trust him?"

"Yes, we kin trust 'im. Alvia Dodd will do any'ing fer money."

That which Ralph had overheard almost took his breath away. It was plain they were plotting the

robbery of Dodd's bank; indeed, plans were already laid, and only waited the coming of Thursday night to carry them out:

The talking men moved off down the path and Ralph went cautiously forward to where they had stood. He found two paths crossed here, and thinking the men would hardly go toward Blender, took the opposite way.

As he walked on toward home Ralph was busy with plans to thwart the robbery. The part Alvia was to have in it was not plain, but that the robbers relied on him to help was apparent. By simply keeping quiet about the banker's son, and giving away the plot, would be an easy way to get rid of him. Such a thought came to Ralph and was instantly disowned.

"I will go in the morning," he meditated, "and tell Mr. Dodd all about it."

From the deep reverie into which he had fallen the pastor was rudely recalled by the fierce ringing of the fire bell in Blender. A great reddish glow was over the heavens, and to his nostrils, on the night air, came the scent of burning pine.

CHAPTER XVIII

AS MAN SOWS

The people of Blender looked upon the ruins of their church with saddened hearts. It was almost beyond belief the building of yesterday could be a heap of smoking ashes so soon. To many the loss was not unlike a death in the family, and around the crumbling foundation, in the light of a new day, they talked in whispers.

When the pastor had reached the scene of the fire, after a hearty run, the roof had fallen in and the building was doomed. All inquiry as to the probable cause of the fire was fruitless. One could only guess, an occupation in which many engaged to no purpose.

To the pastor the loss came as a shock, but left him by no means downhearted. The old building did not fill the present-day requirements as he wished for. Plans for a new building had concerned him ever since he came. The old building was gone, not in the way he wished, but gone, and now he was free to work out the plans.

Loss on Blender Church was total. A majority of the trustees holding, that if Providence saw fit to destroy a house belonging to Himself, it ill-behooved them to make any provision for the re-building, hence there was no insurance. The matter of insurance, in pressure of other duties, the pastor had overlooked.

"Reminds me of Jonas Tubbs," said Jim Brown, as he stood with others around the smoking ruins.

"Jonas went over to Sedalia to see a balloon ascension an' parachute jump. He took it all in from A to izzard. Why, when he got back home he could tell

more about it than most anyone, if he didn't have good sense. Poor fellow was hurt on the head an' never got over it.

"Jonas had a bank-barn chuck full of hay. The little hole on the lower end, where the hay rope goes in, was more'n forty feet from the ground. Jonas took his wife's parasol, climbed up over that hay an' jumped out at the hole. He hit the ground ker-wallop, an' broke his right leg in three places.

"When the doctor went out to fix him up, Jonas said he made a mistake. He ought to have used an umbrella. A good many people are like Jonas. We'd like to have that insurance to-day. Yesterday some of our officers thought it a sin. The thing we didn't do, after something happens, is the very thing we know we should have done. Man is an amusin' little cuss when you look at him close."

"Whose fault was it, Jim?" someone asked.

"I don't rightly know in this case," he answered. "Fault is a right smart hard thing to fix, anyhow. The biggest fight I ever witnessed started in a most peculiar way. Newby Beadle an' a friend were walkin' across the fair grounds at Carson, time fair used to be held there, when the friend said to Newby: 'There goes a most uncommon big man ahead of us yonder.' Newby takes a good look at the stranger's back an' says to his friend: 'He'd make a most stupendous good place to land a kick.'

"The friend said Newby wouldn't do it; Newby said he would; an' the talk ended up in a dare such as Newby never would take. With a long run an' jump Newby landed an astonishin' severe kick from behind on the stranger. When they finished fightin' Newby was the most chewed-up human I ever sat eyes on. The stranger said the fault belonged to Newby, Newby said it was his friend done it, an' the friend 'lowed it was the stranger's appearance to blame.

So far as I know they never did settle it. There's no manner of use in tryin' to locate the fault accurately in any given case when a lot of people are mixed up in it."

One man in Blender, no matter how much he may have felt, was showing no interest in the destroyed building. That man was Oliver Dodd, looking over the books in the little back room of the bank. In a financial sense he had no cause for worry. His business was satisfactory in every branch of it and should have induced peace of mind. However, in the man's mind as he sat there was lack of peace and this state had been for some weeks a chronic one. After months of trial he admitted to himself the preacher was right and he was wrong. It was all plain now, looking back over the way. He did need the church, and bitterly he repented in heart ever having said he could do without it.

Mr. Dodd knew his son had reached, or was about to reach, a point where condign punishment would come his way, saving a quick about face for the better. The father had not lost hope for his boy.

With a noisy shuffle of feet Alvia opened the door and entered his father's room. His hat thrown in careless indifference to the table in front of Mr. Dodd upset a bottle of ink which trickled slowly to the floor, forming a pool of black.

"How careless you are, Alvia!" the old gentleman exclaimed. "Whenever will you learn to have some respect for the rights of others?"

"There you go, father; the minute I stick my head in you have something to shoot at me. Since when have you had any respect for the rights of others?"

"I'll declare, if it wasn't just for the looks of the thing, I'd—I'd have you thrown from the room. I believe you have been drinking." A look at the

flushed face of the one before him confirmed the suspicion.

"What if I have been drinking? A man has a right to use his liberty if he pleases!"

"My son, the way you are doing is disgracing us, as well as yourself. Why don't you turn your back on some of the temptations. Rise above them."

"Temptations? All bosh! Nobody but a milk-sop preacher would prate about them. I'm none of your milk-toast fed men! I have faced the world and done as men do; right well have I learned. I expect to deal with the world, and what I don't know about the world and its ways would make only a small book."

Mr. Dodd bowed his head in his arms on the table as his own language, spoken in the very room where they now sat, came back to him.

His voice reflected some of the anguish his heart felt when he next spoke. "I was mad when I used those words. I see my mistake now and bitterly repent. There is hope for you yet."

"No, father, there is no hope. I don't believe I want any. People would call me a queer mixture, of course, but I guess its just naturally in me. With every inducement to do better, all of which I thoroughly know, I have deliberately sold myself to the devil, and have no desire to recall the bargain."

"Certainly, son, you are beside yourself! You are crazy." Mr. Dodd was sobbing.

Alvia looked on his father entirely unmoved. A slight sneering smile was about his mouth as he moved closer and said: "I come on business this morning. I want a thousand dollars."

"A thousand dollars!"

"Precisely. A thousand dollars."

"I have no such sum for you."

"Ah! You haven't. We shall see. Do you remember on a certain occasion, in a certain Northern city, a man knocked you down and choked you nearly to death?"

"What does all this mean?"

"It simply means I know the whole story, and if I don't get the money I'll tell it so every soul in Blender and for fifty miles around shall know! Do I get the money?"

Tottering to the safe, Mr. Dodd returned with a handful of bills, placing them on the table. Not until then did he speak. "There is the money," he said, "take it, and I hope I may never look on your face again."

"Thanks, awfully; you won't see me again until the money plays out." So saying, with a demoniacal leer of the face, he pocketed the bills and walked out. The preacher, entering the front door as Alvina passed out, felt he had a near view of Satan.

Speaking a hearty "Good morning" to the clerks behind the counter, Ralph proceeded to Mr. Dodd's private room, and knocked on the door. Receiving no answer he pushed open the door and entered, to find the banker laying across his table, insensible.

CHAPTER XIX

THE COILS TIGHTEN

The lawn party, given by the Young People's Society, at the home of Silas Warner, had not gone off with the usual spirit. As many people gathered under the swinging Japanese lanterns as usual, but their talk was about the ruined church, and the affair at the bank. Talk regarding the latter was purely speculation. Only a few knew what had really taken place, and they were not telling.

Mr. Dodd was better now, and the physician promised he would be up and about in a day or two. Tommy remained at his bedside, and Ralph wondered why it was, as he moved from group to group around the ground, he missed her so much.

"A nasty thing that at the bank, Brother Glenwood," Silas Warner remarked, as Ralph approached where he and Jim Brown stood to themselves talking.

"Yes," he replied, "a nasty thing, and we have not heard the last of it, I am afraid."

Jim moved off a little further into the shadow, the two following, as he in turn spoke. "Do you know," he said, "I believe that scoundrel burned the church?"

"Alvia, you mean?" Silas asked in surprise.

"Yes, I mean him. I don't reckon I could prove it in a dozen years, but some things we feel, we don't prove. Samp Billings was born a liar I guess, an' I know he lived one. But what Samp used to tell sheds light on this feelin' business, if 'twas all a whopper.

"Samp lived down the creek on a little farm and

was doin' middlin' well, at the time the new Shoshone country was opened up. Samp's neighbors told him all about the rollin' stone an' moss, but Samp said he didn't calculate on needin' any moss nohow. The first thing we knew Samp was gone, an' the next thing we knew he was back.

"Samp never told but one story. He said they had two things in the new country, what he called 'Zephyrs,' which we took to be some kind of a wind, an' a mighty good cave. The first day they landed one of them 'Zephyrs' came just as they was settin' down to dinner. Samp put the folks in the cave, slammed the door shut, an' away he went. It took him three days to get back home, and he hardly got a good breath before the 'Zephyr' come back, an' off he went in the t'other direction.

"They were out there seven weeks an' Samp said he put in most of his time on the road, two days goin', an' three weeks comin' back.

"He didn't 'low he could do much raisin' a crop in such a country. He didn't actually know, but suspicioned it so strong they come home. Nobody ever believed ol' Samp, but I'm here to say his yarn had a heap of principles in it. Again, I say, I can't prove it, but I could spit on the man who burned the church."

"I don't believe Alvia would be above doing such a thing," Ralph replied, "only I don't see what motive he could have."

"Low down cussedness never needs much motive," Jim remarked as others came up.

Since earlier in the evening Ralph had not spoken to Alice, and as he walked beyond the fringe of light, and almost within earshot of the voices on the lawn, his thoughts had to do with her. For Alvia, knowing all he did, the outlook was a hopeless one. Should he tell Alice all he knew? Long the ques-

tion was pondered. First he decided Alice should not learn the facts yet awhile, closely followed by another decision. He would tell her at the very first opportunity. The matter stood this way in his mind when he heard the voice of Alice saying:

"No, Alvia, I have told you all I have to tell, I cannot, and will not, do otherwise."

Ralph had drawn near a small barn on the rear of the lots, and from behind the building came the voice. Evidently, Alvia had communicated in some manner with Alice and secured her presence.

The voice of Alvia broke in impetuously: "You must go with me. We can fly far away from Blender and be happy. Once away from here I can do better. I have plenty of money, and we can live in comfort and happiness."

"Your proposal is an insult I didn't think you capable of. Alvia, you break my heart. Oh! Why can't you be as other men? I will not think of going with you."

"Be as other men! I suppose you mean Glenwood. I am a desperate man, Alice; you make me so. Your old church is in ashes! Now, let your preacher beware!"

"Alvia!" an awful suspicion flashed across her mind as she spoke; "did you set fire to the church?"

Ralph held his breath to better catch the answer as it mockingly came: "What if I did? I tell you I am desperate! No doubt you would like to see me in jail!"

"Merciful heaven! What can I do? Alvia I— I hate you!" Alice stepped back with a low cry of fear as strong hands caught her shoulders. She felt his drink-laden breath on her face and heard his hiss in her ear: "I will kill you!" Alvia's long bony fingers closed about her throat.

Quicker than it took him to think of the details

later, Ralph was around the barn, and with a powerful blow of his fist sent the assailant reeling to the earth. First ascertaining Alice was not badly hurt he again gave attention to the fallen form. Picking him up by the neck-band of his shirt, torn in the operation, the indignant preacher shook him as a terrier does a rat, and set him on his feet.

"If you try to run, I'll kill you." The words came with such assurance the culprit made no attempt to go. "I've a good notion to slap you a few times just for luck." Suiting action to words the preacher delivered a series of open-handed slaps on the cheeks that brought a whine for mercy.

"Oh! I don't mean to do any more than to teach you some manners," Ralph said, as he desisted. "Come on, I want to show the people what a precious animal I've caught." Looking about for Alice he discovered she was gone.

At arm-length ahead of him, the preacher, with a firm hold on the back of the neck, pushed his unwilling prisoner toward the crowd. Amid many exclamations of wonder and surprise the people learned how the fire started. A half-hour later the little jail had its first occupant in six months.

As the key turned in the lock leaving Alvia inside, attention was directed to other things. A man, on a white horse, was coming up the street. Drawing rein before the jail, he threw a sack of something to the stone sidewalk that made a great clatter as it fell.

CHAPTER XX

I'LL ATONE FOR THE PAST

Johnson Saintclair, postoffice inspector, seldom ever failed on a job. Authorities at Washington knew with Saintclair on the trail it was only a question of time until recreant postmasters would be brought to task and robbers locked in custody. With a huge degree of satisfaction the inspector rode into Blender and astonished the men at the jail with the kit of burglar tools found in the hills. The trail of the men who robbed the office at McKinley was ended. "Just luck," was the way he expressed his pleasure at finding in jail one of the men he wanted.

Used to no feeling of tenderness in dealing with criminals, Saintclair found it a different matter now as he sat in Mr. Dodd's room, telling him of his son's part in the McKinley affair.

Propped up in a chair, his wan face showing but little of the heaviness his heart felt, Mr. Dodd listened in silence. When the officer had finished the chief note in Mr. Dodd's low voice was one of finality as he spoke.

"I would be glad to aid my son if I could. I feel he is beyond my help and the law must take its course. However, if anything new in the matter comes up I shall be glad to hear."

As graciously as he could, Saintclair departed.

Ralph dreaded for hours the interview he should have with Mr. Dodd before he mustered courage to knock at the door of his home. Secretly he was glad when a servant opened the door; he had rather expected Tommy would be there.

The coolness with which the banker heard of the

plot to rob, and Alvia's part in it, as well as the confessed burning of the church, was a surprise to Ralph. He had confidently expected a scene, and was puzzled when it failed to materialize. He listened in wonder at the calm, matter-of-fact voice of Mr. Dodd after he had finished all there was for him to say.

"Yes, Mr. Glenwood, I am prepared in a measure for what you have told me. I would change the thing if I could, but it is now beyond me. Steps will be taken to prevent the robbery, and—and—now, Mr. Glenwood, I have somewhat to say to you. Please hand me a drink of water before I begin."

Ralph complied with the request from a pitcher on the stand, and stood as Mr. Dodd drained the glass. "Thank you," he murmured as he set the empty vessel aside. "That makes my throat feel better. Be seated, Mr. Glenwood."

Ralph selected a comfortable chair and leaned back in it, as Mr. Dodd talked on.

"Back in my life, two-thirds of the way, I did a thing that has returned to curse me. Before I tell you of it, however, I want to beg your pardon. I could have helped you do some of the things,—glorious things,—you have accomplished in Blender. I was blind, blind and mad, and that fact has much to do with my son being where he is.

"I was young then, Mr. Glenwood, younger than you are now, and full to the brim of dare-devil life. The path of fate, I suppose it was, no other definite reason ever suggested itself, threw me in the Eden of two hearts as young as I. A man and his new wife. She was a delicate thing, and trusting. As I looked on their happiness it somehow made me miserable.

"Without cause I hated the happy young hus-

band. Her love for him maddened me. To win her affection was the task I set my wiles, and right well did I succeed, for she was a trusting soul, and simple. She didn't think a man could lie. None ever had to her.

"Well, I won what I desired; no spider ever gloated over the frightened fly in his web as I did over my victory. She promised to go away with me, and one night we went. I have wished a thousand times to forget the accursed night. Away in a distant place our companionship for a time was sweet, then, it paled on me. I hated her when she clung pleadingly to me, and cursed her, and struck her. God forgive me!

"One day I went away and left her; left her to die. The husband came before she died, and in his arms she passed out. As God is my witness there was bitterness in my heart when I heard how she went. A bitterness toward my own soul, and in the excess of it I wept. Fool that I was, I thought the tears in some way palliated my crime.

"Time went on, and in the busy world I entered the past was all but forgotten. Grown strong in worldly interests, it was only natural so blind a fool as I should think himself immune from suffering. One who has no thought for the woes of others should not expect commiseration with lavish hand from his neighbors. The pity of men I do not deserve, and cannot ask for, but, if a contrite heart can obtain it, I crave the mercy of God.

"These years, deserved suffering has been cumulative, and just now the storm breaks. Had I done years since what I now propose doing, peradventure I had been saved the dregs of the cup. Too late all such thoughts, but maybe it's not too late to save my soul. God knows how much I wish I could move time back, and help my boy save his.

"Mr. Glenwood, from this time on, every cent of money I possess, every moment of my time, every energy of my body, shall be spent in serving God. As He is my helper, I'll atone for the past!"

To listen unmoved to the words of Mr. Dodd was an accomplishment Ralph did not possess. When he had finished, himself in tears, Ralph wept for company. "Thank God!" the preacher ejaculated, as he went toward the chair and grasped the warm, extended hand. Continuing, he said, "I have known the facts for some time, Mr. Dodd, and in my heart have sympathized with all concerned. In your effort to live as you would like I shall warmly second every attempt, in every possible way. As to the past respecting myself, think no more of it; all is forgiven, and shall remain between us as a closed book. Of the past as it concerns you, think no longer of it, it lies buried in the grave of Christ. We will face the future together, and shall mutually conquer."

"I have grown in grace," Ralph thought as he once again regained the street.

In front of Silas Warner's store a group of excited men were all trying to talk at once. In the open light of mid-afternoon the prisoner had broken jail and was gone to the hills.

CHAPTER XXI

UNTIL DEATH

"Ol' 'Amerika' couldn't hold him," Jim Brown, standing in front of his store, remarked, as Ralph came up and inquired the cause of the excitement. "But it's not surprisin', when a body figures its got all it can do to hold itself. Its too much of a strain on the ol' trap to ask it to hold a prisoner."

Finding a posse had gone in pursuit of the fleeing man, and learning all the particulars of the escape, Ralph, turning to Jim, asked, "Why do you call the jail 'Amerika'?"

"Why? Don't you know? I supposed you had heard. Ole Oleson, you could tell he was a Swede by his name, come over here, straight from his native land, to work on the construction work when the railroad was buildin'. Ole got drunk one day, an' set out to tear up the track, but went off in a dead stupor, after carryin' ten or twelve ties up in front of the post-office. The boys carried him down to the jail an' laid him on a table to get sober, settin' down to watch it. In two or three hours he set up an' began to take interest in things. One of the boys asked him if he knowed where he was, an' Ole said, 'Yas, I bane in Amerika.' What particular part of 'Amerika' he couldn't say. From that day to this the jail has been 'Amerika.'"

"I am glad the men got off so soon. They should be able to capture him," Ralph soliloquized.

"What's that? That posse?" Jim, who had overheard, again spoke. "I'm not sayin' I could do better, but they couldn't catch cold molasses. Bill

Rubey used to go bear huntin' in the snow. Said he could track 'em; a blind man could do as much. When the tracks got too fresh Bill would set down an' wait. Wasn't in any hurry, he said. Lots of people pursue good deeds just like Bill hunted bear, an' I'm almighty afraid that posse will bring Alvia in the same way."

The Blender jail was not noted as a Gibraltar of strength. It consisted of a wooden building, ten by fourteen feet in size, the boards running up and down, fastened with nails. A shingle roof completed the house. Standing in the center of the room was a steel-barred cell for prisoners. Out of the mistaken goodness of her heart, the jailer's wife, when she had taken Alvia's dinner to him, yielded to his pleading request, and unlocked the cage. Once in the room it was an easy matter to kick off a board and escape. No time was lost in seizing the golden opportunity.

With night the posse returned to Blender, tired and discouraged. The prisoner was not captured.

Plodding up the home-leading path Ralph was worried in mind. Alvia was a dangerous man; how dangerous the preacher knew perhaps better than anyone else. For himself there was little fear in his thought. From the moral cowardice he had witnessed at the barn, he argued truly, a man stood in small danger of open attack. Viewing the safety of Alice was an entirely changed matter. He was afraid for her.

Canvassing the probable attitude of the fugitive's mind it was easy to conclude he would be desperately frightened. This condition of thought would urge him on until Blender would be left far behind. Fear of consequences would naturally preclude any idea of return. Turning over and over in his mind these thoughts so absorbed was he that the presence of

Alice in the path ahead was unnoticed until her voice startled him.

"There is no trace of him?" she asked.

"The men have returned without him. It seems some parties from Six-Mile Point have reported a man of his description passing there. The sheriff thinks he will get as far away from Blender as he can. Post-card offers of reward for his capture, accompanied by description, will be made ready to-night and sent out by the morning mail." The climb of the hill, and extended sentences, quite exhausted his breath and Ralph was forced to desist.

Standing where they were, the dim-laying town below them in the twilight, formed an attractive picture. A picture lost on them. A little catch of the breath, much like a sob, caused Ralph to again speak.

"I hope it don't hurt you so very much, Alice." The voice was rich in solicitude.

"No," she answered, and the sob he thought he heard was not in her voice. "I learned something last night. I know now insult and abuse can kill a love once thought eternal. So far as my affection is concerned it matters little to me what becomes of Alvia Dodd."

"I am so glad, Alice. Glad for your sake, I mean. I am, of course, sorry a man goes as Alvia has gone, but we have the satisfaction of knowing we did what we could."

"Yes, I shall always be proud of having done what I believed to be right. I am sure you have nothing to regret in what you did."

"Alice—" Ralph spoke the name and paused so long she turned questioningly toward him; "I have had something to tell you but didn't think it was time—not proper—no, I mean too sudden. Well,

I just can't say it right, but what I mean is I love you. May I hope?"

With a little glad cry she reached out her hands to him. "Ralph, I learned more last night than I have told you. You may not only hope, but count your wish attained."

To Ralph there never was such a night as the one around him had grown to be now. The night his heart had been in was so dark a one, it seemed by comparison the full day sun was beaming down upon them now. The beloved form in his arms, over and over, the old, old, ever new story was told.

"I will be a better, stronger man, because of you, dear," he told her, "and whatever honor years may bring us the lion's share shall be yours. You have made me so supremely happy it seems my heart was never any other way."

The answer she made was the sweetest of the sweet to him. "It is honor great enough simply to have you, Ralph dear," she said. "You are noble, true, and just what I would have you be. I love you with my whole soul. I am yours. Yours until death."

Hand in hand, under the stars, the lovers followed the path to the house on the hill.

CHAPTER XXII

IF YOU EVER NEED A FRIEND

Strong guard patrolled the Bank of Blender with bated breath and nervous footsteps. Unknown to them the apprehension was needless. The robbers never came. In the deep darkness of Thursday night alarmed by the events in Blender, as gathered by a scout, dark forms crept out at the timber line and made off to the west.

With Thursday night in the past, the people breathed easier, and women no longer jumped in fright at every shadow or unexpected voice.

Early on Friday morning Ralph sought Banker Dodd in his home to offer congratulation on the seeming immunity from danger and found he was absent.

In place of the banker Tommy was in the library:

"I called to say how glad I am our fears of last night were groundless," he said, offering his hand.

"Yes, Mr. Glenwood," she replied, advancing to meet him, "I am also glad. So many things have been happening, however, I don't know that a few more could matter much."

The visitor seated himself, his surprise shown somewhat by the fact he sat down on his hat.

"I beg your pardon," he cried, hastily arising.

Whether he was speaking to her or the hat Tommy did not know, so said nothing.

"Your father is not at home? I mean he is out?" This double venture was made as Ralph again sank into a chair, one foot jammed into the crown of the unfortunate hat on the floor, much to the detriment of the head-piece.

With an amused expression on her face Tommy suggested she be allowed to take the hat. "I am afraid you don't manage it very well," she said.

Very red of face and much confused in manner, he handed over the offended and offending article, as he said, "I am so sorry, Miss Tommy."

"You mean the hat?" she asked, smiling.

"No, I mean about Alvia, and—and—some other things." Then he, too, smiled as he added, "I wish I had left that hat at home; I think I shall another time."

Tommy was serious when she next spoke. "We are certain of your sympathy, Mr. Glenwood, and proud to possess it, though I am compelled to own, my heart is strangely light this morning for one enduring that which I have."

"Better that way than bowed in grief, if one can," he suggested.

"I suppose most people," Tommy went on to say, "would think it quite the proper thing to do, should I run off, and leave my troubles. Would you run away from trouble, Mr. Glenwood?"

"I don't know. You see I have never been really tried along that line. I don't think I would." Deep in his heart Ralph was uncertain of his conduct under such circumstances as now beset the woman before him.

"I just feel I must talk a little," Tommy pensively said. "All my life I have been sure when trouble came, as it has come, to get away from it would be my chief concern. When the test is applied I find the very opposite. I don't mind in the least, to say, your preaching, and your counsel, has had much to do with the change.

"In many particulars my life has not been a very happy one. For almost as many years as I can fully remember my concern has been for Alvia. Just

as any true sister would I have tried to save him. It broke my heart when the plans failed. I was sorry when you failed, not by reason of your fault, to save him.

"All the while I felt I knew how it would end. In my desperation I even tried to have him leave Alice alone, both for her sake and his, thinking, this one tie severed, he would go away from things into which he had fallen. My very trying only made the matter worse. How hard it was to propose some of the things I did, only my own heart shall know.

"It was all a failure. Warning and pleading alike fell on deaf ears. This morning I am reconciled in heart, the same as I would be if he were in his grave. The agony and torture are all gone; only sorrow remains.

"For my father my heart is more troubled, and yet, I can truly say, I am glad. I know all you know, Mr. Glenwood, of his past history, and I expect, more of his determination regarding the future. He blames himself in a large measure, perhaps rightfully so, for Alvia's failing. I have no such reproach upon myself as he, yet his condition of mind regarding the whole business is now the same as my own. We would undo it all if we could. Impossibilities cannot be helped.

"All his life my father has been running from the results of his sin, a thing unguessed by me all these years. The utmost of my persuasion was needed to prevent his running again. A persuasion liberally aided by quotations from your sermons. How happy I was when he said he would stay and attempt to atone for the past. My father will need much of your help, Mr. Glenwood, and I am sure he can and will be of some help to you.

"The future will hold much of sadness, I know,

for both father and I; for myself, some trials of which I cannot speak, but we shall claim your sympathy and help."

"Right gladly will I extend what sympathy and help I am capable of," Ralph exclaimed. Tommy had revealed to him a degree of fortitude under trial such as he had never witnessed. Just how great her courage was he was far short of knowing.

"I thank you," she uttered in a broken voice, and with an effort continued. "For you and Alice I wish a pleasant, happy and useful career, and Mr. Glenwood, if you ever need a friend, above all other needs, remember, please, I am that one."

Tears were in his own eyes as their talk ended with his saying, "I shall remember! God bless you!"

"Speakin' of Alvias," Jim Brown was saying, as he did up a package for a customer; "it don't do much good to run from trouble. Denver Smart, who lived up the creek, tried that the Summer followin' the high water. Denver lost all his crops, had the blues bad, an' said it wasn't any place for a decent white man. The next Summer he took his belongin's and struck out west, for what he called 'God's Country,' but I don't 'low as any special country has superior title to that claim. The grasshoppers ate up everything Denver had, except his family, hosses an' wagon, and ate the cover off the wagon. That same Summer the man on Denver's ol' place made eighty bushels of corn to the acre. Up-to-date, so far as I know, no man ever stacked up much pay by runnin' away from trouble."

"It's hard to tell," the one who listened rejoined, "just what we'd done in Alvias's place."

"Yes," Jim agreed, "that's a fact; an' it's another fact, we don't always do as we think we will. Harry Pendleton set in this very store, off an' on for eigh-

teen years, tellin' how he'd run things when he got married. One day he married Mariah Hottel, who came to Coon Hollow, followin' the war, an' took her home. The very first thing he done was to try runnin' things accordin' to his notions.

"Well, sir, Mariah grabbed an iron fire-poker, three feet long, and wejghin' 'bout seven pounds, an' took after Henry. He tried climbin' through a crack in the rail fence, stuck, and Mariah caught him. When she was all finished Henry had changed his mind. Eighteen years, or more, to make it up, and less'n five minutes to change it.

"Henry 'lowed, when he came after the arnica, if we'd just forget all that 'tom-foolishness' he'd been talkin', he'd be tremendously obliged.

"Many a man's had the same experience as Henry, only in a different way.

"I think, if I'd been in Alvia's place, I'd a staid in 'Amerika', and took my medicine; but, as you say, it's hard to tell just what we'd a done in Alvia's place."

CHAPTER XXIII

WHAT THE NIGHT TOLD ALLAN

In a sense the pastor was sad at heart over some of the occurrences on his field of labor. In still other ways he was on the mountain top of rejoicing. So far as his own heart was concerned, the week passing since he stood on the hillside with Alice, and heard her sweet promise, was the gladdest seven days of his existence. Every hour was full of good promise. Even sleep had its dream of love.

Arrangements were made to use the large hall over Jim Brown's store, as a meeting place for the congregation, until the new church home could be finished. This new home, as yet only in process of being planned, gave promise of filling the requirements of the people. Ralph had only this evening received from the architect the first blue-print drawing of the plans. Looking over them, first with Alice, and explaining the features of interest to her, he retired to his room to study them.

A queer procession of thoughts filled his mind as he sat. The home of Mr. Barnes, and his sick child, the pastor had visited there to-day; Mr. Dodd and Tommy, their strong resolutions, coming up from the very depths of despair; Alvia fleeing, no one knew where, and another set of plans for a building, not a church house. In minute detail the cottage, Alice's and his, was gone over. From these back to the blue-print before him attention wavered and the hours passed.

All evening, rising clouds in the northwest, dark and muttering, had threatened rain. Deep vibrations of thunder over the near hills, keen flashes of light-

ning, and water blown by the wind through the open window, now told the early muttering had become fact.

Ralph arose to close the window and stood for a moment, watching the spots of the earth, momentarily revealed by the quick flashing light, and drank into his nostrils the refreshing air, his face sprayed by the dashing rain drops. "A wild night outdoors," he muttered. "God grant no one may be out in the hills to-night." His chief thought was of Alvia as he resumed his place at the table, and the thought was one of pity.

How long he sat in study, after closing the window, Ralph never knew, but he felt it was growing late, when the impression someone was calling came to him. For some moments he sat in silence, hearing nothing but the moaning wind, driven rain, and roll of thunder. "I was mistaken," he thought. "But I certainly heard someone call me."

Work was again resumed, only to be dropped in another moment, as a clatter on the window-pane, much like gravel thrown from below, came to his ears. "That noise was not made by rain," Ralph thought, as he arose and hastily threw up the sash.

"Oh, Brother—Mr. Glenwood!" came from out the rain.

"Is that you, Allan?" Ralph asked. He didn't think he was frightened but his hands shook.

"Yes, it's Allan—come Brother, go with Allan. Allan can't help—Brother can; Allan sees in night; can show the way—Allan can't help."

"Who is it needs help, Allan? Where is it?"

"Allan can't tell—he show. Allan sees in night; come, Brother, follow Allan. Allan never forgets. Great noise-thing speaks to Allan to-night—his eyes see; come Brother!"

Donning a rain coat, Ralph hurried downstairs,

in as much haste as darkness would permit, and stood with Allan in the rain. In the dark, aided only by brief play of lightning, Ralph made out the form beside him to be that of a man, small of stature, anywhere from thirty to fifty years of age, bent of shoulder and nervous in action. The look on the countenance was one of half cunning.

When Ralph would have taken his hand he drew back, and something like a shudder convulsed the small body.

"Allan is afraid," he said. "Night is good to Allan—Brother is good—Allan does not forget, but Allan is afraid. Follow, Brother, Allan will show what the night tells."

Again Ralph tried to question, but in vain. Allan could not, or would not, tell more. "Very well," he at length said, "I will follow. If you try any treachery on me it will be all the worse for you, lead on."

"Brother not afraid of Allan? Allan sees—Allan does not forget. Come!"

Off in the night the two went, Allan leading with such rapidity of motion that Ralph found it a difficult matter to keep up. All talk was ended and, save the storm, no sound was heard by either except the labored breathing of the other.

The trip would have been a hard one under far different circumstances—on such a night, in face of weather such as few venture out in, the journey became one of pure grit and endurance. Ralph was not afraid, he thought, but as perilous paths were traversed, deep forest entered, and unknown streams crossed, he wondered. Many times he stopped, making attempt to question the guide.

Nothing could he be induced to say, more than the single word, "Come!" as onward he pressed. Of the guide Ralph wondered much. Apparently he was a being of only half-wit. Something, Ralph

pondered, had brought Allan to his window on that first occasion. What it was remained shrouded in mystery. Perhaps it was the working of a diseased intellect, imagining some service done by Ralph. At any rate it was plain, Allan regarded himself as a friend to the preacher.

The storm was little abated as mile after mile of the journey lay behind. Fatigue began to tell on Ralph, and his impatience to know something more again manifested itself in question. The two had come to a halt under a tree by the roadside, a place which bore some slightly familiar signs to Ralph, as he asked, "How much further, Allan?"

"Soon." The answer came brief but satisfying. Hardly a hundred yards further on, the dull, monotonous roaring of water came to their ears, and Ralph knew they were in the vicinity of Roaring Spring. Simply saying, "Come," Allan left the road and, walking swiftly a matter of some fifty yards, halted under a small tree, pointing to an object on the ground.

"There," he said, "Allan sees—the night told it."

Kneeling on the ground Ralph discovered the object to be that of a human body—a woman, cold in death.

A vivid flash of lightning sent the kneeling man recoiling in horror—he had seen the face. It was the face of Alice, a long, cruel, blue mark at the temple told where a blow had fallen.

"My God! Allan," he cried, as he gathered the beloved form in his arms; "do you know who did this—how it happened?"

"Allan can't tell," came the answer. "Allan is afraid. Allan does not forget."

Not to Allan were the next words spoken. Standing erect, his strong arms raised toward the storm, there was death in his voice as he spoke.

"This is the work of Alvia Dodd, and I call heaven to witness, as sure as I ever see him again, I will kill him!"

Turning to Allan he told him to lead the way back home. Bearing in his arms the precious burden, goaded onward by the despair of his heart, Ralph never faltered until he fell in a swoon at the threshold of home. Those who came to the door saw nothing of Allan. The night had swallowed him up.

When Ralph regained consciousness, daylight was come, and the house was a house of mourning.

CHAPTER XXIV

JERRY MAKES A FIND

"All the fence is gone out of West Hollow, an' Lizard Creek is up all over the lower twenty," Simon Bridges said to his wife, as he came into the house, early on the morning following the storm. The "great storm" it was called then and has been called for many years since.

Simon Bridges was one of the investments of the Blender pastor. Entirely by accident, so near as accidents ever happen, he came to Blender after twenty years spent in the mines, worn out, and threatened with miner's consumption. One day he fell in with the preacher, and in an hour, had told all his life history into sympathetic ears.

Ralph had but recently purchased eighty acres of land, most of it rough, but capable of supporting a family. Simon and his wife, with their son, Jerry, soon moved to this farm and set up a happy home.

Often Ralph came to the farm, and ere long, the old miner was thinking along some lines hitherto neglected. There was rejoicing in the humble home, when the quiet pastor led the soul of Simon into the fold of the redeemed. The happiness of Mrs. Bridges knew no bounds when she realized the change. "Hallelujah!" she shouted again and again, "I always knowed Simon would be saved, and now it's come. We owe more to you than we can ever repay, Brother Glenwood."

"You can easily repay all you owe, Mrs. Bridges," Ralph had answered. "Only let the service of your lives be acceptable unto God."

"Where did Jerry go?" Mrs. Bridges asked when, breakfast ready, she missed him.

"I seen him going toward the old cave as I come across the field. I guess he'll be in after awhile."

"We won't wait; just set up."

A blessing had been asked, and breakfast was being dispatched with appetite, when Jerry came flying in at the open door, upsetting the water bucket as he came.

"Mercy on us! What's the matter?" Mrs. Bridges sprang to her feet in alarm.

"Oh, papa, mamma, I've found a 'sow!' The biggest kind of a sow!" Jerry was out of breath. Simon sat in open-mouthed astonishment, while the mother fanned the boy with her apron and managed to say, "There, there, Jerry, don't take on so; the woods is full of sows—besides, it's too much fuss to make over any hog."

"Oh!" and Jerry, regaining his breath, jumped up and down, "I don't mean a hog, papa, a 'sow!' I mean a 'sow!'"

"What, son," it was Simon's turn to get excited, "you mean lead?"

"Yes, papa, I mean lead. The whole back end of the old cave's fell out; the water's running through, and lead in there as big as a house!"

Without waiting to explain to Mrs. Bridges that miners sometimes call a large body of free lead, a "sow," and without his hat, Simon set out for the cave in a lope, Jerry following as closely as he could.

"Such a fuss over a measley, no-account hog," Mrs. Bridges muttered, toddling along after.

It was as Jerry had said. Where the rear end of the cave had been was large chunk lead, with water swishing, gurgling and foaming through it. The bright cubes, water-burnished, shone like diamonds. Simon had been a miner long enough to

appreciate exactly what it meant. Turning to his wife, as she came panting up, he pointed toward the exposed lead as he remarked, "No matter if the old fence did wash out. There's thousands in sight, and other thousands back under that hill. The storm done some good, anyhow."

"Thank goodness, Brother Glenwood can be repaid in something more substantial than thanks!" Mrs. Bridges applied her apron to her eyes.

From over the hill, as he disappeared toward Blender, came the voice of Simon, "I'm going over to town to tell it."

It was at Jim Brown's store Simon learned of the night's tragedy. His own story of discovery seemed to be a matter of small consequence when he finally told it.

The possibilities of great things to come for Blender, should the hills prove to be underlaid with lead, was manifest to every listener, but heart to talk of it was lacking.

"It's one of the irony things of life," Jim said, "such as is always happenin'. A man gets knocked over in some manner, then Providence comes along an' sets him up on his feet, with a pat on his head. The Lord is mighty kind to shorn lambs an' mere men, if you've taken any notice to it.

"Years ago, Zeke Ling, a no-account scalawag, was goin' with ol' man Purlee's daughter, Sal. They was to be married, an' Zeke skips out for some reason. Most of people would have been glad of it, but not so the ol' man.

"Long 'bout that time, Harry Gilmore, as likely a young fellow as ever walked these parts, came down to sell fruit trees for a nursery off some-place. He sure did look like Zeke, no one could deny. Well, he was walkin' down the road one day when ol' Purlee stepped out of the brush, with a shot-

gun in his hands, an' with a voice like a calf bawlin' down a rain-barrel, said, 'Zeke Ling, I've got you.'

"Harvey tried to tell who he was, an' ol' Purlee wouldn't listen. Just marched the young fellow off down to the house, an' sent for a preacher an' some neighbors. They come pretty soon, an' preparations were made for a weddin'. Ol' Purlee lined 'em up on the floor an' says, 'Zeke Ling, you run around here holdin' secret conflabs with my gal, after I told you not to, an' got her in a notion to marry you. Then you run off. Now, I want to know, will you marry her?'

"Harvey tried again to say he wasn't Zeke, but the only effect was to make ol' Purlee hoppin' mad. He jumped three feet high an' come down ker-smash, an' says to his boy, 'Jim, hand me the shotgun.' To the preacher he says, 'Now, go on.' The girl answered her part of the questions real glib-like, an' then come his turn. The preacher read the questions an' waited for the answer. Ol' Purlee was pressin' the gun against Harvey's head, an' whisperin' in a loud way, 'say yes, or I'll blow your head off,' when the door opens an' in walks the real Zeke.

"It's always that way, only everything's not a weddin'. When man goes to the wall it's God's chance; an' with many of us the only chance we'll ever let Him have. We're so uncommon busy, buttin' our heads 'gainst the rock wall of hope died in formin', we can't see an' don't hear."

CHAPTER XXV

WHAT HAPPENED AT THE FUNERAL

"It seems it would have been easier to give Alice up had she had a long illness. The horror and suddenness of her going makes it almost beyond my power to withstand." Mr. Dwight was speaking to Ralph, as they both sat in the home, dazed by their mutual loss.

"We are so thankful," Mr. Dwight continued, "to have you share the sorrow with us. We are getting old, and it always helps the old to have younger shoulders on which to lean at times like these. Do you have any idea, Ralph, who did it, and how it was done?"

"But very little just yet," Ralph answered, "but I expect in some way to find out. I believe Allan knows all about it. Poor fellow, he is incapable of telling. More than this, I have nothing, only suspicion."

"Ralph, it's hard to fool the heart of a parent. My heart tells me who killed my daughter. The blood of the Dodds is none too good to do it, and God help me if I ever see Alvia!" The gleam in Mr. Dwight's eyes as he spoke caused Ralph to tremble in fright.

"To me belongeth vengeance," saith the Lord." Even as he spoke Ralph wondered at himself. He remembered his vow now, and a cloud of bitterness swept over him.

Earnestly the old man again spoke, "I am getting old, my boy, and old men lose much of their power to fight. My struggle of more than forty years is an old story to you. Too good to be true, it

seemed, when my soul emerged from the mist and stood in God's sun on the mountain-top. It was even so—over night, for reasons best never told, the mists rolled in again, and to-day they are multiplied. I've thought much of Paul lately and what he once said, 'But I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection—lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a cast-away.'

"The fact one ought so to do is as plain to me to-day as ever, but my courage is gone. I don't want to end my days in sinful act, but I feel I will."

The cloud of bitterness moved away, as Ralph heard. For the old man's sake, he thought, and turning to him he said, "You've one more good fight in you yet, Mr. Dwight; won't you promise me to make it?"

Fervently the old man answered, "Yes, son, I promise, and—and—God help me if I lose!"

Under the pleasant shade of the trees, on the green grass of the church yard, the friends and neighbors of Alice gathered to pay their tribute of love and respect. Standing beside the casket Ralph tried to speak words of consolation to others, feeling sorely in need of words spoken for himself.

If at times the usually eloquent preacher stammered, and his emotion-choked voice refused to say the words his thought would, few noticed it. Most all present knew the love-secret between the speaker and the one over whom he spoke, and the tragedy gripped every heart.

Tenderly he spoke of the young life and its faded dream. Bitterly he denounced the sin of human-kind, not content with feeding on itself, but must needs reach out to slay the innocent.

"We can't understand much of things happening here," he went on to say. "Some day we shall under-

stand, as one beholds in clear glass of a mirror. It will be beyond the rolling tide of earthly life and care. God grant we all may come there!"

It was over. One by one the weeping people looked upon the familiar face, and passed one, stopping only to press the hands of Mr. and Mrs. Dwight, and the pastor, in silent sympathy. The kindly undertaker stepped forward, and with a distinct click the casket lid went to its place. The face of the sleeper would be seen no more against that great day.

While these events were taking place in the yard of the church, a solitary man, wild in appearance, his clothing torn and tattered, moved from place to place among the trees of an adjacent hill. Roving, bloodshot eyes watched the audience in the distance, while from bloodless lips came curses. Drawn onward by an impulse he could not resist, since early morning the man had drawn nearer Blender.

All the hours since he had escaped the jail Alvia knew the hand of every man was against him. To be seen meant capture and punishment. Staying away meant punishment, and it was a dear price he paid now as he stood watching.

When the funeral cortege moved from the yard toward the cemetery in the rear, Alvia obeyed the impulse of his heart. Fleeing down the hill with all the strength of his famished body his steps lay toward the newly-made grave.

No one noticed the tramp-like being as he drew near and mingled with the waiting crowd. Close friends would have been bothered to recognize Alvia in the miserable man among them, so changed was he.

The body was lowered into the grave in silence. Ralph with uplifted hands pronounced a benedic-

tion. Alvia, with uncovered head, pressed still nearer.

The last sound of the preacher's words had died out when an exclamation from Mr. Dwight called the attention of those near. Something bright glistened in the sunlight, as he spoke in a voice so loud and distinct all present heard: "I let them go free when they stole my wife! I'm accursed if I'll let them off for killing my daughter!"

Mr. Dwight had discovered the presence of Alvia. Before anyone present could make a move to hinder, the bright object flashed at arm's length, and the report of the pistol awoke echoes among the monuments. Divining Mr. Dwight's intention in part, Ralph's left hand closed over the muzzle of the weapon the second the trigger was pressed. The leaden missile, intended for Alvia's heart, lay imbedded in the extended hand, from which the crimson blood flowed.

Reeling as intoxicated, Mr. Dwight put his hands to his eyes, and would have fallen to the ground but for Ralph's supporting arms. "I—I—made the best fight I could, my boy—and lost!" He gasped out the words as his eyes closed.

The excited, surging mass of people all intent now on capturing Alvia made his escape easy. Quickly distancing those who pursued, he regained the timber, and was lost to sight.

CHAPTER XXVI

DOCTOR HENDERSHOTT COMES

Roy Hendershott, M. D., sat in his comfortable little office on one of the main streets of Joplin, Mo., and contemplated the new sign, done in gold-leaf, swinging in the wind outside. The satisfaction that sign gave, and all it meant to him, would be difficult to describe.

Years ago, as a young man, Roy Hendershott and his young wife, took up their home on a Kansas farm. Ancestors of both, back so far as knowledge went, were farmers. It appeared to be their calling; so Roy told Jane, they, too, should farm. With all the ardor of youth the task was attempted. Failure was written large after every effort.

Try as he would, Roy did not like farm work. Bandaging the broken leg of a chicken was a more pleasing task. Jane, with her quick wit, perceived the road toward which success lay, and with abundant faith in her husband, urged him to become a physician. Roy was pleased with the urging, and no less so at the faith reposed in him.

Weary months at medical school took the place of the farm, a weariness, no less trying to the wife than for the study-driven man. At last the great day arrived when the new graduates in medicine received their credentials, and Roy was among the number. "I owe it all to you, Jane," he had told her when the first transport of joy was over.

In selecting a place to locate, Joplin claimed attention. Recent development of immense zinc and lead mines was causing a heavy influx of men and

money to that region. When the doctor arrived in Joplin, fully three thousand people were living in no better homes than temporary tents. Some were dignified by the addition of a board floor, and some were not. So rapid had the growth been, permanency could not keep pace.

The new doctor found, that out of a possible population of twenty thousand souls, something like three hundred were physicians. Not daunted by this array of talent, he set up an office, and flung his shingle to the breeze.

Courage is a good thing to have in one's possession—however, other things are needful. The doctor found right soon he needed patients. Out of the sum-total of all the people, he figured his share at a fraction over sixty-six. He was wont to tell Jane, jokingly, his share was distressingly healthy.

This state of affairs could not be endured always, so, when a promising field opened at Blender, the opportunity was jumped at. The doctor's one patient during his stay in Joplin, furnished the money for the new sign, which the owner now contemplated with pleasure.

"That sign will look mighty good in Blender," he mused.

Absorbed in thought, he scarcely noticed, when the office door opened and his wife entered.

"Guess who?" she demanded, approaching from behind and placing her hands gently over his eyes.

"That's not hard to do, Jane," he answered with a smile. "No one except you and I ever enter inside these portals. Never mind, dear, Blender will be different."

"When do we go?"

"To-morrow, if nothing happens."

"Do you know, husband, I shall be glad to get back close to the country? I have thought much

lately of our old farm and things that happened there."

"Are you sorry?" A cloud passed over his face as he asked.

"No, dear; not sorry. I just love country ways and country air—just natural, I reckon."

"So it is with me—the call of the blood, I take it. We can't forget, the blood of generations who lived close to the land flows in us."

"I never think of our farm life, Roy, but that I think of the little fellow the moving wagon left at our house. I can see him yet; his little head all crushed by the kick, and the shudder of his pale little body. If it were now, instead of then, you could help him. I wonder what ever became of him?"

"It's one of the things we shall perhaps never know," the doctor mused rather than talked. "I wondered then what made him so afraid of people, when he got well. I know now, the little chap's brain was hurt."

Arousing himself with an effort, the doctor arose as he said, "We had best go, Jane, and pack up."

So it was that Blender welcomed a new doctor, and a new sign flapped in the breeze from a post in front of Jim Brown's place.

Jim was soon acquainted with the doctor, as well as most of his past history.

"Well," he said one night as they sat talking, "you waited until you were plenty ol' to start out; howsoever, I see nothin' to prevent your makin' a good doctor. We're never too old to learn if the learnin' is in a good cause. Sometimes a man gets a fool notion to learn somethin' he's got no business with, an' in all such cases, sooner or later, gets the worst of the bargain."

"Doctor Lane was the best all 'round doctor we

ever had at Blender, barrin' you, of course, an' he wasn't satisfied to keep on. Got a fool notion into his head he was a fizzle as a doctor, an' was cut out for a farmer. Lane had nothin' by the way of farmin' implements, except an ol' red hoss, too old to eat corn off the cob, an' not much money—a sure sign, as I've noticed' of a successful country doctor.

"Lane rented two hundred acres of land, up on the flats, an' sunk all the money he had hirin' men to put it in corn. He got a stem-windin' good stand, but it was the year of the drought, an' failed to make corn. His money played out, too, an' it wasn't tended as it should a been.

"Lane borrowed a one-hoss wagon, one Monday mornin' in November, hitched up the ol' red hoss, an' started out to gather in the crop. Up an' down the long rows he went, findin' no corn. Finally he got on an' rode, an' when night come he hadn't found a single grain of corn.

"Well, sir, Lane was a methodical genius, an' he cover that field like a blanket, row at a time. Thursday afternoon, 'long 'bout three o'clock' he seen a bunch of shucks that looked promisin', and stopped ol' red to get off and investigate. Sure enough, it was corn. Stuck away off, in the far end of an enormous bunch of shucks, there it was.

"Lane had a job gettin' the corn loose from the stalk. I suppose he was some nervous. At last it was done, an' Lane had his crop, a dappled nubbin of just twenty-six grains. Lane smelled it, tasted it, and pinched himself to see if he was awake. Actually, he cut up didos between the corn rows, until ol' red turned an' looked at him.

"After the rejoicin' Lane cooled down a little, he braced himself, an' gave the corn an almighty hard toss to the wagon. It went circlin' through the air, turned a somersault or two an' landed plump at ol'

red's front feet. Ol' red reached down, an' for the first time in twelve years, ate corn off the cob—ate it unshelled.

"Like all-possessed, Lane hustled over the balance of the field, an' never a grain. The crop was cribbed.

"Corn was a desperate poor crop that year, but I calculate, the crop is always poor when a man goes to monkeyin' with things he shouldn't.

"This is a funny world, doctor, an' funny people livin' in it. Everybody's funny but us, an' we're a gettin' funny."

CHAPTER XXV

AGAIN ON THE MOUNTAIN

From the day Alice was laid to rest the strains of Casper Dwight's violin ceased. Occasionally he would fondle the instrument in his hands, putting it aside with a sigh.

People of Blender missed the music, and often remarked the fact, asking no reason. From the oldest down to the tiniest tot, all knew it was sadness.

Other than to express sorrow at wounding his friend, Mr. Dwight never mentioned the occurrence at the cemetery. Walks, so long as he was able, led him in every direction, save one. The lonely cabin up the creek was never revisited.

Hot July days had worn out their tedious length, and August was almost come, when Mr. Dwight became unable to rise from his bed. In sympathy, not of words, but rather shown in quiet, solemn shaking of heads, his neighbors heard the news. His last sorrow had been theirs as well.

Ralph missed his friend's kindly conversation as the failing health came on, and with heaviness of heart he noticed the confinement in bed. "It is the beginning of the end," he told himself.

Mr. Dwight sent early for his son, as he had continued to call Ralph, since a certain interview in the past. The wan hand held out when he came did not indicate much reserve strength. The voice, when the sick man spoke, was clear and strong, and so continued till the end.

"Come nearer, son," he said to Ralph, as he entered the room; "I have much to say to you."

Seated by the bedside, his desire to hear signified, Ralph could not prevent a feeling of unwillingness. He wished it might be put off. Mr. Dwight must have guessed as much as he began.

"It won't do any good to put off what I have to say," he said. Pausing a brief spell, he continued: "Things I want to say are not new between us. We have threshed them over a good many times, son, only not under present conditions. I am going out pretty soon, from whence I shall not return, and I don't want to go out in darkness.

"You've tried to help me, son, and have done so, in a degree you shall never know in this world, simply because I can't tell it. An old man's blessing upon you for your efforts! How long my struggle has been you know, and what varying success and failure it has encountered.

"Always, my boy, I have tried to be a man, and have abundantly succeeded, I believe, except in the cultivation of a Christ-like spirit. I could go happy if only that could be accomplished first. For a brief time, you know when, such a happiness of spirit did come to me. Oh! ten thousand worlds like this, were they mine to give, for its return!

"With some souls the conquering of sin is like planting a garden and watching it grow; to others it is like weeding the garden. Mine has been the weeding kind. In heat and rain, the process goes on, and now, the busy world almost over, the hush of my day soon to come, I am weeding still.

"The coming of death, son, is a time for serious thought. My soul is willing to forgive, but there is something about me, the flesh, I suppose it is, that cries out as loud as ever for vengeance on Oliver Dodd and his kind. I want you to help me, and even while I ask it, something tells me that it can't be done."

"Yes, but it can be done, Mr. Dwight," Ralph interrupted, feeling the fatigue of such extended effort was harmful to the sick man. "You have had your chance and lost; I had my opportunity to help you and it failed to last; now, let's permit God, in His wisdom, to try. If you are willing I am sure it can be done."

"Willing to let God try? Yes, of course, I will; God has always been ready, and old Casper blocked the way."

"We shall see! I must go now, and you must rest."

Ralph pressed the feeble hand reassuringly as he left.

Straight to the home of Oliver Dodd Ralph made his way from the sick chamber. Not once did his step falter on the way. No thought that his mission might fail of its purpose occurred to him. A servant admitted him at the door, and preceded him to the library, where Mr. Dodd was seated at a table, writing.

Mr. Dodd dropped his pen in surprise as Ralph entered.

"I wasn't expecting you," he said, arising hastily from his chair.

"The importance of my mission," Ralph responded, "precluded all formality. Casper Dwight is in a dying condition, Mr. Dodd. We can see no hope beyond a few days, at most, and collapse may come any hour!"

Mr. Dodd's voice bore small sympathy as he said: "I am sorry to hear it, Brother Glenwood."

"I have come to urge that you go to Mr. Dwight and ask his pardon."

"Impossible! I cannot do it. It's too much to ask, and utterly impossible to do!"

"Why impossible, Mr. Dodd? You meant what

you said when you told me the past would be atoned for, didn't you?"

"Yes, I meant what I said, but not in that way. What you ask is hard to do."

"Most of right things are hard to do at times. Mr. Dodd, the Bible is plain on the matter of forgiveness. Except a man forgive, from his heart, he shall perish. If, then, forgiving is of such great consequence, how can you, being in the wrong, count the asking for pardon a small matter?"

Mr. Dodd walked the floor with bowed head as he made answer: "I don't count it a small matter; on the contrary, I esteem it a great one—too great for me to accomplish. Casper Dwight never done me a wrong I could hold against him, except the attempt to kill my son."

"But think of the provocation! Some men can forget, while, with others, the attempt at forgetting only whets the memory. Mr. Dwight was one of the latter kind. The sting of his own wrongs upon him, as fresh as though yesterday inflicted, the last crime unbalanced him for a time. You well know, he had good reason to suspect, Alvia killed his daughter. The wrong was wholly on your part, and, Mr. Dodd, the burden of making things right, surely, is on your shoulders."

"I admit," Mr. Dodd paused in his walk, "you are right. 'Tis a hard thing to do, but I admit it all. The question is not one of right or wrong; rather, it resolves into my doing or not doing. I cannot, and will not go to Casper Dwight."

There was a scene, replete with dramatic effect, as the preacher arose to his feet and faced the banker. Considering the excitement under which he labored, his voice was admirably controlled as he spoke.

"I do not threaten, Mr. Dodd," he said, "but just

as sure as Casper Dwight dies, in the condition of soul he is now in, I will tell publicly the whole story. Standing by his casket I will tell the people you stole the wife of his youth. Yes, I will tell it, and more; I will tell them you sent the soul of Casper Dwight to Hell, by refusing to do your simple duty."

"Oh! Mr. Glenwood, have mercy!" The banker sank into a chair, pleading and sobbing.

"Mercy is neither mine to give or withhold; such things are with God."

"Mr. Glenwood is right, papa; you must go to Mr. Dwight." Tommy was on his knees, her arms about his neck, her raven locks mingled with the gray.

"I can't; Oh! Tommy, I can't!"

It was so that Ralph left them. The daughter pouring words of consolation and resolution into the ears and heart of the weeping father.

The report Doctor Hendershott gave of Mr. Dwight's condition as Ralph met him coming down the hill was not assuring.

"The old gentleman is just naturally worn out," the doctor said; "no constitution to build on. It can be only a matter of days, perhaps hours. I left some strengthening cordial, with directions,—drugs are of no use. Please see he is not left alone."

Ralph relieved Mrs. Dwight of her duties at the bedside about eight o'clock, and remained throughout the night, waiting on the small needs of the patient, and watching the flickering life grow fainter. Mr. Dwight tossed his head restlessly on the pillows, the body, too feeble now, for effort. Once or twice he would have talked, but Ralph, fearing a return to the old question, gently restrained him. Well along toward morning the patient fell into a fitful doze of sleep that continued until day had fully come.

Opening his eyes, with a slight start of the muscles, he motioned for Ralph to come nearer.

"I have had a pleasant dream," he said. "I thought I was on a mountain top, and oh! so happy! Presently I heard a rushing, as of a wind, or wings, I hardly knew, and I was carried toward a beautiful city in the distance. Such beauty as I saw, and music I heard, I cannot describe to you. My wife stood weeping, while a form, like an angel, comforted her. In the great gate of the city stood two forms with beckoning hands. I looked, and shouted as I looked, the forms were Alice,—the Alice of old, and Alice, my daughter."

"God grant it may be even so," Ralph whispered.

With a certain indefinable feeling of another presence in the room, though he had not heard the door open, Ralph turned to discover Oliver Dodd slowly advancing across the floor. On he came, and with a slight tremor of the voice, as he took the wasted hand on the coverlid, said; "I have come to beg your pardon, Mr. Dwight, for the unexcusable wrongs I have done you. Won't you forgive me, as I trust God will?"

Sharp and clear came the answer; "I have all my life said I would never forgive, save for a few brief hours at one time, but now, after what my senses have witnessed, I do forgive you, Oliver Dodd, with all my heart. Bend lower, I would kiss your cheek." Ralph heard his own heart beat as the seal of pardon was given.

Then to Ralph the old man spoke, "God won, Ralph, my boy, when we let Him try. I shall go from the mountain top. Please lay me beside my daughter, and on my stone have placed a simple cross, and under it, 'By this sign conquer.' Have nothing else. I would, men who chance to come that way, may think of the only way that leads home. Call my wife."

"God will take care of you, dear," he told her when she came. "We have been happy here, and in fulness

of time, will be happy yonder. Come by way of the cross; it will not fail you. Until we meet again, good-bye; goodbye to all."

A smile passed over the face, the limbs stiffened slightly, and Casper Dwight was gone. It seemed to Ralph his last effort was an attempt to shout.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE NIGHT SPEAKS AGAIN

Early on Friday morning, the one on which Mr. Dwight died, the Barnes' baby took a change for the worse. Nearly all summer she had been sick and it appeared nothing could help her. The new doctor gave the parents some hope on his first visit, but now, as he stood shaking his head, the hope was banished.

Doctor Hendershott was entirely too tender hearted to engulf the parents in the grief of what he realized was the truth; however, there was no need, they divined it.

Mr. Barnes and his wife were members of the church when Ralph came to Blender, though seldom ever in attendance. Little of worldly goods did they possess and that little hard earned. Their farm was rough, rocky, and none too fertile. Being able only to help in a small way the financial interests of the church, they concluded the little didn't help much, so did nothing.

All this was changed when Ralph came and began to visit in the home. From his first visit, and the first time any preacher had ever called on them, Mr. and Mrs. Barnes were regular at church services. Under the friendly advice and wise counsel of the preacher, the next to barren land, took on new prosperity,—a prosperity reflected in the house, as well as field. Mr. Barnes learned, nothing is counted small in good service, if it is the best one can do.

So highly did the two esteem their pastor, the week was regarded an extra long one in which they failed to see and chat with him; a feeling shared by neighbors all about them.

The day held no other duty for the man and woman than watching their loved one. The duty was enough. In the afternoon, tender hearted neighbors, with children of their own at home, came in to help, finding only sympathy needed.

"I wish our pastor knew," Mrs. Barnes said to one of the women, after a half-hour of silence. "We have so leaned on him his absence is like one of the family gone. I know he is in sorrow over the death of Mr. Dwight, but I know he has room in his heart for us, as well."

"Bless your heart! yes. Brother Glenwood would wade through fire to help one of his, no matter how much it hurt. James shall set off at once to tell him."

James referred to by the woman who spoke, was her husband, and it took short time for him to saddle a horse and start.

When Ralph heard of the desire for his presence at the Barnes' home he did not hesitate. All he could do or say to comfort Mrs. Dwight, had been done and said; no need for lingering there.

"No, thank you," he replied to the proffered loan of the horse. "I will walk. I can soon make it, and I need the exercise."

Five miles of distance soon covered, Ralph entered the humble home, to find the Angel Death had come first, and the little spirit was gone. Blackness of despair had settled over father and mother heart. Skillfully the pastor accomplished the task of binding up the broken hearts, and poured balm of comfort into the wounds. When he knelt to pray, each one present felt the man was talking to God, and they were in the presence.

"It wasn't always I could sympathize with you as I do now," the pastor remarked in taking their hands at going. "I have been schooled somewhat in sorrow of late, and I know—I used to think."

Mr. Barnes smiled through his tears. "We are obliged to you for your kindness in coming and smoothing the road. Poor souls, like ours, finds the way mighty rocky sometimes, and we're powerful glad to have someone that's been along show us where the ditches are."

The road along which Ralph walked toward home lay, the greater part of the way, through Honey Creek Bottom. The stream itself ran to his left a distance of one-half mile at the point of widest land between stream and road. Again the distance narrowed until less than fifty yards intervened. At these places the swirl of the on-rushing water could be distinctly heard, and often a gleam of moonlight, reflected back from the stream, filtered through the fringe of trees on the bank.

Always a rapid walker, the cool night offering splendid inducement for exertion, Ralph had left the most of his road behind him when he stopped a moment for rest. The sound of crunching rock his last step had set in motion had but died away, when the noise of another step fell on his ear and a man came into view around a boulder. It was Allan of the Sycamore. Excitement showed in every movement of his body.

"Oh, Brother!" he gasped with shortened breath. "Allan has been looking for you. The voices talked to-night and Allan show you. Allan does not forget—come and see."

Ralph made an attempt to draw closer, as he asked; "Where did you come from, Allan?"

Allan, stepping lightly backward, kept his distance while replying. "From where the waters talk."

"No—no—I mean where were you born? How came you here?"

"I can't tell, Brother; the voices don't say. Come, Allan show what the night tells."

Thinking of that other trip, on an entirely different kind of a night, Ralph followed as Allan returned behind the boulder, and led in a narrow way toward the creek. Coming presently to a foot-bridge, Allan quickly crossed, and turning sharply back toward the water, was lost in the shadow of the bank. Allan's command, "Come Brother," guiding him, Ralph soon stood under the bank.

A bar of gravel and sand, in high water entirely submerged, but now dry, across the far end of which the rolling water surged lay before them up the creek.

Toward the water, up the bar, Allan led the way. Lapped by the struggling water, as though in attempt to drag it back, on narrow sand, reposed a man's body.

Distorted features, plain in the moon-shed light, were turned toward the sky.

For a moment Ralph stood in contemplative silence, then turning to Allan he spoke. "I don't suppose you can understand, Allan, but I am thinking of what Jim said about 'the mills of the gods. They grind 'exceedin' fine.'"

Pulling the body to a place on the bar safe from the water, Ralph pursued his way toward Blender. He tried to take Allan with him, but at the mere suggestion, he made off into the woods, fleet as a deer.

All sleep was driven from the eyes of Blender people as the word flashed from man to man, and home to home: "The body of Alvia Dodd has come back."

CHAPTER XXIX

I NEED ONE FRIEND

That ever memorable August Sunday dawned bright and clear. Few ministers are ever called upon to perform such service as confronted Ralph when he stood among three caskets in the church-yard and spoke.

How different the lives. Casper Dwight, an old man weighted with trials, all his life a struggle with sin, now gone, victorious. Alvia Dodd, born to nobler things, substance of body and soul spent in riotous living, gone down in defeat. The face, even in death, bore the brand of evil. For the child, an innocent smile even now on the quiet face, told better than spoken words, the condition in which the young soul quit its tenement of clay. And so they lay, the two men, one on either side of the child.

For the first time in his life Ralph failed to take a text as he stood to speak. He felt the texts before him were more than he could properly cover. Nothing sensational came from the lips of the speaker as he reasoned of the beauties of righteousness and its reward; of sin and judgment.

"The measure of our own righteousness," he said, in part, "is fixed by our own desire. It may be a long struggle, and hard, but in the end we shall overcome if faithful. It is a mistaken notion when we look for God to determine judgment on our lives, as we stand before Him. Every moment, every hour, every day and every year, from the beginning of accountability, we are each one writing the judgment upon which the great Head of the church will pass sentence.

"We are glad the minds of living men and women are prone to forget the evil deeds of the dead, not that

it can in any sense help the departed, but it does help the world. Good deeds of men need no eulogy pronounced on them; far beyond the power of eloquence to add or detract, the good works repose in faith, safe anchored. To-day, as we carry to completion this remarkable service, I trust we shall remember all the good we can and do our best to forget the wrong,—remembering only so much of the latter, as will guide us from danger in our own experience.”

With rare tact the speaker demeaned himself and the subject. Lessons drawn were lasting in the minds and hearts of the hearers, and offensive to none. A general sigh of satisfaction with the sermon passed over the vast audience as he concluded.

In the hush preceding the singing of a hymn, Mr. Dodd arose, and approaching the casket containing the body of his son, signified he would speak. All eyes were fixed in rapt attention on the man as his steady voice fell with pleasing distinctness on the ears.

“More than forty years ago I committed a heinous sin against Casper Dwight and against my own soul. I shall not tell now what it was, but I intend you shall all know. Not in the least shall I spare myself, nor offer any excuse in justification. A crime can never be justified in God’s sight—only atoned for.

“Through the years since my conscience has been heavy with guilt, so much so every action of my life has been built to accommodate it. I knew the right only too well. My stubborn will refused to bend to any plea, whether within or without. When Mr. Glenwood came, the large man in him was antagonistic to the little man in me, and there was war—a war in which I lost. But in losing I was responsible for the wreck and ruin of my son.

Counsel from my own lips sent him further in the paths of sin.

"One day the tide rolled in, exactly as sin ever does, and I saw. My boy had burned the church; was a thief; a drunkard; and—and—perhaps a murderer. If there were other crimes I am glad I don't know. No need of anyone to tell me where the heaviest share of the responsibility lay.

"Eleventh hour repentance is not a safe thing in any life, but I repented, with what bitterness of spirit only God knows. I told my story to our pastor, the most of which he had already heard, and told him of my repentance and desire to atone for the past, so far as possible. In my heart I thought I meant it. When Casper Dwight lay dying—dying under the shadow of a perfectly natural desire for vengeance on myself, Mr. Glenwood sought to have me go to him. I refused then, knowing full well nothing but the right was asked of me. It was a hard fight I had with myself that night, my daughter (God bless her!) helping me, and right won. Just before Casper passed away I begged his pardon with such a lightened heart. He kissed my cheek: when he freely forgave, and I felt that kiss severed the last hold of hell on my soul.

"I am getting to be an old man now, and no telling how soon you may gather to do for me what we now do for these—God grant it may not be until I shall have done some service to prove to you my sincere earnestness. Be all this as it may, while I have the opportunity, I must say that to Tommy and Brother Glenwood belong the praise for showing an old man the road, and the gratitude of my heart shall ever go out to them.

"On this site we shall, in days to come, erect a building of God, complete for all the services he intends a church to do. We shall so serve the

cause of Christ that other young men, if they do fail, will fail in spite of us, not because we never tried. In this effort I shall do my humble part, and to this end I pledge my never-dying soul."

The scene that ensued was one such as Blender people had never witnessed. Strong men, sinners for years, fell upon their knees and cried to Heaven for pardon. Sobbing women clasped in loving embrace their sons and husbands, while their own lives were deeper consecrated.

William Cramp, a stalwart six-footer, noted all over the country as a hardened man of the world, said, as he ran forward and grabbed the pastor's hand: "If the church can do that for a man I want to get into it quick!" Cramp's view well expressed that of all.

"I claim that promised friend now," Ralph said to Tommy, as he gently took her hand at the head of Alvia's grave. "I have lots of friends in a way, but above all other things, I need one friend."

"It is as I told you, I am the one. I, too, need a friend. Shall it be mutual?"

"Yes, as I know my own heart," Ralph answered. The pressure of the hands between assured the hearts of both, that friendship hath her compensation.

CHAPTER XXX

WHAT JIM BROWN SAID

Oliver Dodd's stand for right had an instant and determined effect upon the fortunes of Blender Church. People drew no line of distinction between the pastor and his church. They well knew the working over of Dodd was only a small part of the accomplishments, but a conspicuous part. The case was as a man doing his duty suddenly awakened to find the duty had made him famous. The church had arrived, just as it will always do, when the needs of people are touched.

Money began to flow in upon the Building Committee. Men who had never before paid a cent to good causes contributed liberally, and expressed a hope that work would soon commence.

"We shall not need to ask as much from the Board of Church Erection as we thought," Ralph remarked to the session. "We have cash and subscriptions close to eighteen thousand dollars. Mr. Dodd's subscription is not in yet, but we had counted, you know, on borrowing fifteen thousand dollars to make up the thirty thousand dollars needed."

The church session was meeting in the rear of Jim Brown's store with all members present except Mr. Dodd. Keiffer and Kiel were now as anxious to help as Dodd himself, a fact attested when Mr. Kiel spoke.

"I am not a rich man," he said, "but I will increase my subscription enough to bring the amount up to full eighteen thousand dollars."

"We thank you truly," Ralph answered as he heard. "We should be ready to put men to work next week."

"When do you expect it to be completed?" someone asked.

"If the Winter is not too severe we should be able to dedicate by April, or not later than May."

Further conversation was interrupted just then by the arrival of the delayed member. "Good evening, Mr. Dodd, we are glad to see you." Ralph voiced the greeting of the others, as well as his own.

"I drove out into the country," Mr. Dodd explained, "and was later than I expected. How do the subscriptions foot up?"

Ralph answered. "We have even eighteen thousand dollars."

Mr. Dodd drew from his pocket an already written and signed check, filled in the amount, and tossed it across the table, saying: "The first real evidence of my intention. Religion is a poor thing unless it converts what a man has, as well as the man himself."

The check was drawn for twelve thousand dollars.

"Gentlemen," Ralph spoke from his heart, "this should be a time of thanksgiving; let us bow our heads."

The prayer ended, Silas Warner was the first one to speak. "I don't see any reason why our church should not have a successful future."

It was Jim Brown who answered. "The future will be successful. All we've needed was an incentive—an incentive we could feel, see an' realize. It has come at last. Maybe it would have arrived sometime, but Brother Glenwood has hurried it up. Sorter reminds me of my trip over on South Fork to visit Uncle Charley, an' it right well illustrates

the idea of incentive in all affairs, if 'tis a little long."

All settled back to listen as Jim went on.

"Once upon a time—that bein' a good way to begin tales of fiction, only there's hardly a grain of fiction 'bout it—I became imbued with the desire to visit Uncle Charley, twenty-five miles south, over on South Fork.

"For personal reasons, I started out to walk the distance. I had covered 'bout nine miles an' was just beginnin' to think how foolish to be doin' thus, when I met a man with a mule.

"In less'n three minutes the man had one hundred an' thirty dollars of my money an' I had a mule.

"The man took his departure an' I took mine, or rather, tried to. The ol' mule was obstinate an' positively refused to budge. Of course, I was on his back, an' in a good position to dig my heels into his flanks. He layed down when I done it. I got off an' he arose, only to repeat the business when I got on again.

"I got mad to think I had so much money invested in such an animal, an' gatherin' a club I groomed him from the tip of his ears to the knee of his left hind leg, an' would done more only he lifted his foot an' put me face-down in a thorny brush pile. I thought he would be gone to a more congenial neighborhood when I got out of the brush—it took me thirty minutes—but he showed a surprisin' degree of patience.

"I had heard 'coals of fire' heaped upon the head would start the balkiest mule that ever balked. I raked up a lot of brush an' went to manufacturin' 'coals.'

"That mule must have seen fires built under similar conditions, judgin' from the way he stuck up his head an' brayed. Then he laid down an' actu-

ally wept. He laid there on the ground until I commenced to gather up a few of the 'coals,' then he jumped to his feet with all the rapidity of chain-lightnin'.

"For the next fifteen minutes that mule revolved like a patent squirrel cage, kickin' with his hind feet, pawin' with his front ones, mowin' great swathes from the atmosphere with his teeth, an' yellin' defiance with his voice. I dropped the coals an' began to take diplomatic measures causin' him to suspend hostilities. I held out my hand, an' said: 'Whoa, muly, whoa!' If anything will stop a mule, that will.

"He stopped, took his bearin', an' then, wabblin' over to me, laid his head on my shoulder. I have had heads laid on my shoulder since, but never such a head. He looked so downright pitiful I felt sorry for him. It seemed by every flap of his ears an' wag of his tail he was askin' my pardon. I put my arms around his neck an' freely forgave him.

"When it come to travelin' there was no change in the mule's heart. I fondled him for an hour, callin' him all the pet names I could think of, an' when I got on his back the ol' fool absolutely refused to go.

"Someone has said you can do more with kindness than any other way. Kindness failed with that mule just as it fails nine times out of ten in dealin' with men. It is a hazy idea, an' I make no excuse for haste in sayin' it, that expects men to move on any proposition until the benefit at the other end can be seen an' appreciated. There is one thing that'll do it—that's fear, but as soon as the scare is over the average human will climb right back into sin.

"Incentive, that's the thing to move men an' mules, an' in more respects than the one they are

alike. It was plain to me, if I ever reached Uncle Charley's there must be an incentive applied to the mule. Pullin' a tuft of green grass I held it up in front of his nose. The move was a success. He reached for it, an' finding he couldn't quite make it, took a step. Steppin' backwards, I kept the grass at a respectable distance, the mule still comin'. Walkin' him for a time in this manner he was permitted to have the grass while I congratulated myself on the shrewdness of it all.

"The question now resolved itself into one of keepin' the incentive before the mule. On the ground before me lay a smooth stick, plenty long, the work of but a moment necessary to fasten a bunch of grass to it. Mountin' the mule an' shovin' the stick down past his nose, he saved me all the trouble of holdin' by catchin' it in his teeth. He seemed to gather the grass would be gone forever should he relinquish his hold on the stick. Many a man's got considerable the same idea.

"That pesky ol' mule laid back his ears and then and there commenced one of the wildest rides ever ridden in pursuit of a mouthful of green grass.

"On, on, over bridges and under bridges, past farms an' through timber we sped, until the mule brought up 'gainst a farm wagon in front of the post-office, right here at Blender. The ol' scamp wa' headed in the wrong direction."

Jim sat a moment in reflective silence before he finished. "Men are followin' their little bunch of grass down the broad way that grows narrower toward destruction. It is the business of the church to furnish incentive, which leads into the narrow way that grows broader toward life."

"But don't you think," Silas asked, "if men looked for incentive on their own account they could do as well?"

"No, I don't calculate they could. They're too apt to get the wrong idea.

"Down on Spring River, R. C. Stacey built a magnificent mill at a cost of twenty thousand dollars. He sold it to Benton Williams for that amount an' intentionally forgot to mention the ground, swearin' the mill and power was all he sold. When Williams found he could not recover the ground he became anxious to sell; so, when Clem White come along an' offered twenty thousand dollars for it, he sold. He forgot to say anything in the bill-of-sale 'bout the power an' just sold the mill.

"Fore long a stranger came and offered to buy the power of Williams, to use it in runnin' a factory of some kind.

"Well, sirs, Williams sold the power an' reserved the water-wheel. That's a sample of what man will do with nothin' to show him. He'll have incentive plenty—incentive leadin' in the wrong direction.

"Williams wasn't any worse than the rest, maybe, only he done more of it. A man gets credit for what he does. A band of White Caps thought they hung Williams one night an' discovered next mornin' it was his brother John, the Methodist preacher, 'stead of him. The devil watches close on the heels of the man who'll serve him best.

"The average man needs help powerful bad. As Bill Dunning, who run the grocery store an' took a cheese-knife along when he went to collect bills, used to say: 'You can't trust 'em.'"

CHAPTER XXXI

RALPH GOES FISHING

Fishing for the mere purpose of catching fish is seldom ever good in the month of September. Fishing, to one who loves the sport, simply as an excuse to loll on the bank and watch the water beat itself into white foam, or stop in complacent eddy for rest, is always good when the day is right. A time to dream dreams of days ahead, while in vivid perceptive, come hallowed visions of tender things from the days of old.

Ralph was going fishing, the first time since boyhood. A hook and line fastened to an ordinary cane pole (the whole borrowed from Silas Warner) swung from one hand. A small can well filled with bait and a larger one, equally well filled with luncheon for himself, dangled from the other. Before he had crossed Main Street on his way to the creek he had been informed a half-dozen times, "Fishin' is no good."

"Well, I'm going, anyway," was the invariable answer.

September days in Missouri are usually pleasant, neither hot nor cold. "Could not be better if 'twas made for my purpose," Ralph thought as he walked. The panorama of beauty spread out toward the hills, the delicate purple hue cast over field and leaves struck the sight with favor and reminded the observer of his first view of Blender hills and that which lay between. What he already knew was verified when, after an hour of trial, he admitted to himself: "Fishin' is no good."

Gathering his equipment he wandered at a pace of leisure miles up the meandering stream. Birds disturbed by the strange visitor fluttered and chattered in overhanging boughs while excited squirrels barked their disapproval from the far side of tree trunks. The wanderer took no notice; his dreams had come, visions vying with them the right of attention.

In a densely-shady spot where two inviting grass plots met he finally paused. Throwing himself with a cry of ecstasy on the pleasant bed at his feet, he prepared the hook and tossed it in the near water, to speedily forget all about it.

Naturally, the mystery surrounding the untimely death of Alice, had preyed on his mind. From every vantage point he tried solution, which ever and always ended alike—in failure. That Alvia Dodd had committed the crime he was certain, but death had even closed his lips forever.

"I don't want to believe there was a lingering affection in her heart which caused her to go out in the night to meet him. I won't believe such a thing." Such was the counsel he over and over gave the questioning heart.

The loss of Alice, accentuated by the manner of her going was a terrible blow to the man. When he went from her presence to his room that fatal night he knew he sat on the hill-top of exultation. Exactly as all of us at some time come to the depths with the wreckage of fond hopes, he came down the slope with benumbed heart. Ralph fought his battle of grief to the end—and won.

After the storm has blown over some shattered timbers always mark the course by which it came, no matter though the building replaced be stronger than at first. The people felt their pastor was stronger, tenderer and more helpful than ever. And

so he was; just as refining fire dissolves dross from gold, leaving added luster. In his heart Ralph knew the tender, quiet sympathy and help of Tommy Dodd had been a powerful factor in dispersing the clouds of sorrow. It was a source of wonderment to him how easily she rose above the overwhelming cares pressing in upon her.

As a matter of fact, it was not so easy as it appeared. Struggles were gone through unguessed by others; not by her father, more often in her company. It would have been a matter of surprise to Ralph, could he have known, that for his sake she smiled when tears would have been more satisfying.

The success of his work at Blender was a cause for congratulation. Ideas of practical, applied methods, years in forming, had born fruit far beyond his fondest hopes. The future was rosy with promised outcome. Amid plaudits of a united people the corner-stone of the new church building was laid and the work of construction went merrily on. It was a shock to some and a matter of commendation to others, when the pastor worked with his hands on the walls, a thing he often did. Amid such themes as these the hours glided on and with them came thoughts of luncheon. The quiet spot and comfortable cot of grass, though the luncheon helped, was inductive of sleep. Not unlike the things of the morning were the repeated dreams which whiled away three hours of the afternoon.

"The sum total of the preacher's catch was one sunfish, three inches long, and four 'crawdads,'" Silas Warner told wherever he could get audience.

While he had no fish to show Ralph knew his day had been a success. "And beside," he would say, "had I not gone I would not have found Allan and then—" But he did go.

Awakening with a start to find the day older than he expected, Ralph removed the last of the crawfish from his hook and pushed on yet farther up the creek. He had in mind to see more of the stream, and striking the public road he knew crossed above him, catch a ride back to Blender with some passing farmer.

Some distance above the spot he had reluctantly left behind, to his right hand, across a neglected clearing, the dilapidated roof of a log-cabin came into view. "I declare," he whispered, "I believe it's Mr. Dwight's old home."

Pushing aside the yellowed weeds obstructing his way, the ripened seed falling to the ground as he went, he made his way toward the old house. Coming presently to a path showing signs of recent usage, he stood at the tumble-down gate marking what had once been the single entrance to the yard.

The beauty of the place as a home-site was apparent, even with neglect and decay in profusion.

"How he must have hated to give it up!" Ralph spoke aloud, unconscious of doing so. "What demon could lay hold on a wife that she, of her own will, would leave such a home, and such a man as Casper Dwight? Some things in this world are harder than death!"

A few paces toward the house, beside the grass-matted path, grew a bed of forget-me-nots. One only blossom lifted its delayed head skyward. Ralph plucked it, as he thought how true to all the flower signified was Casper Dwight.

"To thy memory, oh good friend, lover true; I shall not soon forget the lessons you taught me!"

With uncovered head Ralph stood, and when he left the place it was as one steps away from revered things. A frightened hawk arose from the ground and circled overhead as he approached the

house. Clanging shut from a sudden gust of air, the rickety old door on rusted hinges refused to open to his easy pressure. Standing a moment on the flat door-stone outside Ralph fancied he heard a groan of distress. With easy breath he listened and again it came from inside the house.

Throwing the weight of his body against it, the old door gave way with a crash, and he stumbled half-way across the room. For a moment the quick change from the bright sunlight to the interior dimmed the eyes and he could not see. This quickly passed, and on a pile of moldy straw, in one corner of the room, he discovered the outline of a man. Approaching the form, he was greatly surprised at what he saw, and made doubly thankful he had come that way. The man was Allan of the Sycamore.

Reaching down Ralph shook the prostrate form, calling, "Allan! Allan! Look up. Don't you know me?" The only answer was continued moaning. Plainly the man was seriously ill.

Moving Allan to a more comfortable position, Ralph went to the road, returning in a short time with an obliging driver and his wagon. A rude bed of straw was improvised in the wagon box, Allan placed on it, and the journey to Blender began. On arriving home, Ralph assisted in carrying the sufferer to his own room, and sent for Dr. Hendershott.

Promptness, a necessary requisite of the physician who would succeed, the doctor counted one of his chief virtues, so he was soon examining his strange patient. Ralph was impatient through the seemingly long period the doctor bent over the bed. He managed to restrain himself, however, until the doctor at last straightened up and turned from the inspection.

"Well, what do you think of it?" he asked. The doctor was in no haste to speak, and when he did each word was carefully weighed before utterance. "It is a serious and difficult case," he said. "The poor fellow is in a paralyzed condition from the result of a diseased brain; just how badly the brain is already affected I cannot say.

"At some time, certainly not lately, the man's skull has been fractured, the splintered bones pressed down upon the brain. Through some cause not plain now, and may never be known, irritation has come on and the man is done for."

"Can nothing be done?" Ralph inquired in alarm.

The doctor took a turn across the room and replied:

"There is one chance in one hundred. The only hope is an operation defined in surgery as trephining. The operation of trephining consists in the perforation of the bone of the skull with a trephine, a small cylindrical saw, working on a center-pin. The trephine produces a hole in the skull, which varies in size, usually about an inch in diameter. When necessary this hole is enlarged by the use of Hey's saw and chisels. The whole idea is to raise the bone over the brain, and remove whatever else there may be oppressing.

"In a recent fracture, if the brain was not too badly injured, the operation would be simple enough. The element of doubt here is long standing of the injury, the brain is even now diseased more or less, and the patient has but little constitution. However, we return where we began; it is his one hope."

"Then, doctor, it must be done. We will take the chance. The responsibility, in the absence of any known relatives, shall rest on me."

"Where shall it be done? Haste is imperative."

"Right here, in my room, and I expect to aid all I can."

"Your aid will be necessary, and much appreciated, Mr. Glenwood, but I think I should tell you, it may prove to be a matter of great inconvenience to you. Should he recover from the operation, he will likely be bed-fast most of the Winter."

"Doctor Hendershott," Ralph's voice rang as he spoke, "that man did service for me that nothing I can do will ever repay. The operation shall be here, and if I am unable to wait on him properly, a trained nurse who can will be provided."

"Very well," Doctor Hendershott answered from the stairs.

Ralph had made his arrangements without consulting Mrs. Dwight, but he well knew that she would interpose no objections. Indeed, when told of it, she set about providing warm water, towels, bright lamps and other necessary articles, as though the case belonged to her.

Stout of heart as he was there came times during the tedious, long work of the surgeon, when Ralph was compelled to turn away his face. At such times he was heartily thankful such work didn't often come his way. Doctor Hendershott said nothing except now and then to issue a sharp word of command.

At last it was ended; tools were back in their case, operating table carried out and the patient, still under the influence of anesthetic, lying on the bed. With happy heart, at the post-office next morning, Ralph told Silas Warner: "My friend Allan still lives."

CHAPTER XXXII

A DISCOVERY

For weeks following the operation Allan lay most of the time in a stupor. When aroused he would glance about the room in a questioning way, take that offered him, and settle back in sleep.

One morning as Doctor Hendershott bent over the bed, Allan opened his eyes, looked full in the doctor's face for a moment and nearly took away that worthy gentleman's breath by saying: "I know you."

"Yes—yes, I—I dare say; I am the doctor."

"When did I get back?"

"When—what do you mean?"

"I was afraid and run off—run ever so far. The longest dream—strange people—I was scared at; talking water outside a big cave. Oh! a horse kicked me here—and I dreamed."

Allan put his hand to his bandaged head.

"Can it be possible you were the boy left at my home out in Kansas?"

"I don't know what you mean," Allan answered, "but I know you. They carried me to you when I was hurt."

"Truly, this is a small world, after all," Doctor Hendershott reasoned, as he hurried home to tell Jane the remarkable news.

"Just to think," he told her, "after all these years, in so distant a place, under such conditions—it's almost beyond belief."

Jane pondered a moment before she replied. "It simply goes to show, if one is ready to do duty,

'duty will arrive. Like trouble in this respect it seeks the ready one."

While it took, as the doctor had prophesied, most of the winter before Allan was on his feet about the room, yet from this time his improvement was steady.

The intellectual development of his patient was a constant source of interest and amazement to Ralph. His experience was as one who teaches a word to a child, to find he has mastered the entire sentence. At times a great light would go over the face, now taken on a child-like appearance, and he would say: "Yes, I don't forget—I see it all now. When I can I will tell you all."

Early on the day of its dedication Ralph arrived at the church. Every vestige of scaffolding removed, the great house stood complete in its beautiful, substantial outline. The last bit of litter swept from the floors, and the last speck of dust brushed from the pews and furnishings, the janitor stood leaning on his broom.

"Good morning, Brother Counts," Ralph cheerfully greeted as he entered. "It's a fine day for April, isn't it? Not a sign of a shower anywhere."

"It is that, but we won't mind a shower or two under this roof."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Well, I don't know; I have some work to do on the tables in the dining-room below, and I suppose the women will want to try out the new cooking-range. If you don't mind, you might bring a small load of wood from the shed."

The shed, all that remained of original buildings, stood well back of the church. Ralph found some difficulty in releasing the rusted hasp on the door when he tried to open it, and had recourse to a loose rock on the ground before entering. The removal of

one stick sent the rick of wood rolling, piling it up at his feet. One round stick, slightly longer than the others, apparently a piece of grape-vine, attracted his attention. Some dried substance on one end of the stick having the appearance of blood, called an exclamation to the lips as he carried it toward the light. Encrusted in the dry substance, encircling the wood, reposed several strands of golden brown hair—the hair of a woman. That the hair could have come from but one head, Ralph knew, and the knowledge sent him reeling, as a drunken man, to Counts in the basement.

Frightened at the appearance of the face before him the janitor asked in alarm: "What is the matter, Mr. Glenwood? Are you ill?"

Giving no attention to the question Ralph thrust the wood out before him as he asked, "Do you know where this stick of wood came from?"

"Yes."

"Where, man?"

"From John DeLancy's place on Blender View, the rise of the hills ten miles west. The house was entirely empty when he hauled."

"This stick of wood, Mr. Counts, which just now tumbled from among the rest, is undoubtedly the one which struck my poor Alice to her death! What kind of a man is this DeLancy?"

Counts handled the stick of wood gingerly in his hands while replying. "Seems to be a quiet sort o' fellow. Lives all by himself and never associates much with anybody. In fact, no one knows much about him. He never comes to Blender any more, since him and Oliver Dodd had some trouble, six or seven years ago. Another man hauled the wood."

"What was the trouble with Dodd?"

"Something over a note; interest, I guess. I never did hear exactly."

Ralph returned from the sheriff's office barely in time to take part in the opening service. He was heartily glad the addresses of the day were to be delivered by other men, noted ones of the Church, and nothing was expected of him other than to briefly express thankfulness at the task completed. At the organ, greater than the old one, Tommy was at her best, and ever as her fingers swept the keys, Ralph felt the joyful notes all could hear were meant for him.

In defiance of the out-of-place tempest in his heart, in the parlors and dining-room, after the services, Ralph moved from group to group welcoming them with glad hand and smiling countenance. So successful was he that none other than the janitor noticed anything wrong.

All unknown to the rows of joyful men and women sitting down to the well-laden tables, the sheriff and his deputy passed in front of the church, and rode away to the west.

CHAPTER XXXIII

HE GOES YONDER

Thinking Allan might need some attention, Ralph quit the gathering at church soon after dinner, and went home. As he entered the room Allan dropped the slate on which he had been practicing at writing, looked up and smiled. "I wasn't looking for you so soon," he said.

"I hurried back to see if there was anything I could do for you."

"Nothing—unless you have time to listen while I talk." Allan shifted his position in the chair as he spoke.

Ralph drew his chair close. "I have the entire afternoon if needed. Go on."

"I want to thank you first for all you have done for me. I can never pay you for it.

"While you have been gone to-day, the rest came back to me, and now I know it all. My name is Allan Warner." Ralph gave a start of surprise as the intelligence fell on his ears. Allan continued:

"I must have been about six or seven years old when a man picked me up at the side of the road one day, put me in a wagon, and took me away from home. I have no idea how old I am now. I cried for a long while at first, and the man threatened me with a club. After that I was afraid to cry. They sent me out to beg food and other things during the day, and at night I gathered brush for the fire and took care of the horses. I had to stand on a box to put the harness on and off. One night I slipped and fell at the feet of a young horse. It

scared him, and as he jumped, he kicked me hard on the head.

"They carried me to the home of Mr. Hender-shott—the doctor is the same man—and left me. For days I knew nothing. Then I was at last able to be up, but I was afraid—afraid of everybody. One day I ran away, hiding in straw stacks by day, going by night. For food I did as the birds do—took it wherever and whenever I could get it.

"A strange thing, Brother—I think I shall still call you that—from the time I got out of bed my memory has been good. So good, in fact, I never forget a place, a face, or a name except as I shall tell you. One day, after a long time spent in going, I saw my father, and oh, how happy I was, but just as afraid of him as of other men.

"For months I followed him about, from place to place as he went, never letting him see me, nor calling his name. Then I lost him, and a strange thing happened to me. I forgot his face and even forgot his name. Of my mother's face I haven't the slightest idea. On I went, looking into the faces of men, unknown to them, seeking the one I feared I wouldn't know when I found it.

"How many hundred miles I went I don't know, when one day I came to a big cave on the hill above a sycamore tree. I found a place in the cave—some day I will show you—where I knew man could never come; there I made my home. The old sycamore was so friendly I fancied I belonged to it, and learned to call it father, the waters running down from the big spring above, I fancied talked to me, and told me things, and the leaves of the tall tree whispered: 'Son.' I was awful lonesome at times, Brother, and they hugged me up, and talked, and whispered to me.

"The birds and squirrels, and things of the woods,

were my friends, and would come to me in the night, about the only time I ventured out. The great sun and its light I was afraid of, but the moon and stars never hurt me.

"All about the country I went at night, seeing everything and forgetting nothing. In the day I remained in the cave in sleep or storing nuts and fruits, gathered as the squirrel gathers, from friendly trees and bushes. I was so doing when you came to Blender.

"I heard your name spoken and looked upon your face. I remembered you as a friend; one who had done me a good turn, entirely without your knowledge at the time. I resolved to be a friend to you, in the hope I could pay my debt. There was a hard struggle before I spoke to you, a horrible fight with fear, and when I did manage to talk, the words wouldn't come as I wanted them. History of Blender and Blender people was a thing well known to me. The enmity of Oliver Dodd toward you was plain, and some other things, not so plain, made me think Alvia was also an enemy. I tried to tell you and thought you understood.

"As time went on a pair of eyes, I guess you never dreamed about, watched everything. A pair of eyes, Brother, in a cowardly body. I was there when you knocked him down, the night behind the barn, and I trembled for fear. My fear changed to joy that evening when you and Alice walked up the hill, both so happy. I cried for gladness that night in my cave, the first time tears had come to me since the day I knew my father was gone.

"Too frightened almost to move, my mouth shut as if bound, I stood in the shadow of this house and witnessed the striking down of Alice just outside the back door. The outcry my heart made my lips would not utter. When he picked her body from

the ground and carried it to a buggy near the church-yard, I couldn't move. I wondered why someone didn't come. It was only when he started to drive away motion came to my feet and I ran blindly after them. All the way I ran, and every foot of the distance fire seemed to burn my head. He threw her cold body to the ground, where we came later, and left it alone with me, the night, and the storm. Hardly knowing what I did, or how, I finally reached you, and the rest you know.

"It was an accident I found Alvia's body and even its still outline frightened me. How it came there I do not know.

"Then followed the awful fire in my head. It burned, and burned, and kept burning. When I walked it seemed to help, so I walked on and on. Everything got dark; there was an old house; I went in, and what happened you know better than I.

"You have brought me back to the world, and Brother, I am thankful. It's a different world than I've been used to. I expect the cave, and sycamore, and waters, and birds and squirrels, and night, would suit me better, but I am here. God told me things out yonder—things that I didn't forget—and it kind o' seems now, maybe there'll be so many things to hear I won't hear Him as I used to.

"There wasn't much of such thing as sin in my world, Brother, and I know now, it was sin creeping out in humans, that made me so afraid of them. I never was afraid of things in the woods, 'cause they don't sin. I'm not afraid any more, and that scares me worse than ever. It may mean sin makes me bold. Brother, you must teach me of such things. I'll miss the old, but maybe the new will make up for it."

Ralph sat with bowed head as Allan finished. He knew now how Alice died, but only in a sense

was his heart relieved. Why had he not heard? Why was it some instinct failed to send him out? Knowledge was in some respects harder to bear than uncertainty. He arose from his chair and started across to the window as he spoke.

"Allan, was it Alvia who struck Alice?"

"No, Brother; not Alvia."

"Then who was it?"

Allan had also risen, and half-walking, half-tottering across the floor stood beside Ralph at the window. Three men, on horses, came into view, on the road in front of the church. One was strapped to his saddle, while on either side of him rode the sheriff and his deputy.

"I don't know the man's name, Brother; but that is him, going yonder!" Allan was excited and his voice rose high as he spoke.

The man was DeLancy.

CHAPTER XXXIV

RALPH RECEIVES A LETTER

When Ralph went to Silas Warner's store, with Allan's story fresh on his mind, he had all he could do avoiding the telling of the whole matter into the ears of his friend. Two things restrained him. He was not certain what effect the sudden revelation his father lived would have on Allan, and secondly, he had in his mind a great surprise for Silas.

"The surprise will partly compensate for years of search and other years of mourning," Ralph thought as he took the single letter the wrinkled hand passed out to him. "And it won't be long," he promised himself as he turned away.

The letter he received was addressed in a tremulous, sprawling hand, unmistakably that of his Aunt Clara. Hastily he tore open the envelope and read:

Dear Nephew:

This will inform you that your Uncle Joe is no more, having departed this life on April twentieth, after a four-weeks' illness with glanders. He contracted the trouble from a favorite horse he insisted on doctoring for the disease. It is needless to say the doctoring was done over my protest. I am happy to say your Uncle Joe was gloriously converted during his sickness, and we have every hope it was well with his soul when he went.

He wanted that I should tell you of this, as well as his change of sentiment, on what is to be will be. He said, to use his own words:

"With the experiences of my life plain before me,

I am persuaded that there is a sense, in which what is to be will not be. That is, if the right man with the right kind of advice comes along. All my life I have longed, as many others are longing, for a preacher with red blood in his veins and a message in his heart to come past. Sometimes I thought he had come, only to find all he cared about was, firstly, secondly and thirdly, of a good sermon, and good reports of the congregation to carry back to the brethren.

"I hated my land because no one who knew better tried to show me. I risked my life, time and again, for dollars, on account of no friendly hand pointing a better way.

"What is to be will be, is a good excuse for old sinners like me—I've used it many a time—to fall back on, when we see we're in wrong and don't know how to get out. Thank God, the time will come, when the church will be the great center of every community, for every good purpose, and the preacher will be the greatest power in it, simply because he knows his job, knows men and their needs, and is not afraid to help."

I know you will be pleased to know your uncle died blessing you, and rejoicing in your success at Blender. If my health continues good, I hope at some time to make you a visit. Write me at your convenience, and come when it is possible.

With love and best wishes,

Your Aunt Clara.

CHAPTER XXXV

"I WILL NOT"

During the Winter, in which the church was built, the great mining boom struck Blender. A strong company was already operating on Ralph Glenwood's land, paying him regular installments of royalty, when the drills, churning up and down on a score of hill-sides, and in a dozen valleys, began to pierce the depths below.

Not all the drills found the sought lead and zinc ores, but enough did, to send the news hundreds of miles in every direction. What Joplin had been in its most rushing days, as Spring opened, Blender became, only on a smaller scale.

From a dozen rocky slopes, considered of no account except as an occasional thing of beauty by those who cared, there came the chug-chug of hoisting engines, while white wreaths of air condensed steam rolled upward. Temporary homes of canvas, and hastily-constructed shacks of lumber, dotted the stretch of land between the railroad and Honey Creek. All Summer the sound of saw and hammer broke upon the air, and one by one the new-comers removed to neat cottages, leaving the tents to flap in the wind.

Watching the change in Blender naturally following the heavy influx of new people, Ralph thought he knew a radical change in church management must take place. Representatives of other denominations came and made vigorous attempts to organize their work, only to meet with scant encouragement, taking their departure in one, two, three order. After each failing attempt Ralph breathed

easier, thinking, after all, perhaps the church was meeting the needs of the community.

However, as Summer grew toward Fall, this thought of needed change in methods grew upon Ralph, and finally led him to attempt the one foolish move of his ministry. Afterward he was ashamed of the move, but at the time it seemed the only alternative. Many a wise man is surprised, once in his life, to find how foolish he can become when it appears to be necessary.

The old settlers of Blender were glad for the change. It meant increased value of property holdings, more business and general prosperity. As Jim Brown expressed it: "Maybe we can have a Court-house now. Goodness knows we've needed one bad enough these twenty years. The squeezey fellows who voted down buildin' it eight times, hand runnin', will find themselves short of votes next time, I'm thinkin'. The County offices, stuck 'round here in ol' store buildin's, don't give new comers a very good idea of Blender."

From below the awning over the store front, under which Ralph and Jim sat, a good view of mining activities could be had.

With a wave of the hand in the direction of the mines Jim continued to speak. "You see, Mr. Glenwood, man is just naturally too narrow contracted to figure out some things. Some years ago, one Winter, a poor devil of a man, an' his ol' wife, drifted into Baxter Springs, with nothin' to their names but the few dirty rags on their backs. The people took care of 'em until winter was over an' growin' tired of the job, provided 'em a ramshackle horse an' wagon, an' set 'em goin'.

"They drove somewhere 'bout seven miles, at the edge of Galena, an' stopped to eat. After dinner, the ol' man in wanderin' 'round found a deserted

shaft Pat Dixon had given up as no good, windlass, rope an' buckets still there. The long an' short of it was the ol' codger concluded to mine, an' mine he did, the ol' woman turnin' the windlass. They drove the shaft two feet deeper an' struck the sousenest run of jack,—zinc, you know,—ever found in Galena.

"Well, sir, the ol' people sold their mine for eighty thousand dollars. The way they drove 'round over Baxter Springs in a turnout costing not a cent less than three thousand, made the people green with envy.

"There's no use talkin', Mr. Glenwood, there's only one right way to treat another man, an' that's just as you would if he were your brother in flesh an' blood. This world's not nearly so large as it looks, an' stranger things have happened, than for a man to find the poor fellow he has helped is really some relative of his. How can we be sure of all our relation in this man-befuddled creation?

"Then, too, we draw the wrong conclusion from experiences. For instance, Pat Dixon said he'd never stop another shaft until he had gone two feet deeper. The last I heard of him he had a shaft on the Jackson land down five-hundred feet, an' still goin'.

"God meant for men to use reason. Lack of it makes hoss thieves, an' blame poor Christians. It seems to me the chief hold man has over the zebra is man can reason. If he don't aim to use what God gives him, he had just as well go out an' eat grass, like ol' Nebuchadnezzar, an' other animals, 'till his hair is grown like eagles' feathers, an' his nails like birds' claws!"

Jim wondered at the unusual silence of his friend as he arose to go. "I hope I didn't say anything to wound your feelin's?" he anxiously asked.

"Not a thing," Ralph replied as he walked away, "I was only thinking." Thinkingly he pursued his

way to the church. Still thinking, he stood among the graves in the cemetery.

Ralph did not often visit the cemetery, for, instead of healing, the presence of the mounds served rather to gap the wounds. As he stood now, beside the spot where Alice slept below, a thousand lively memories of their short happiness came to mock. Overcome by the surging emotion of his heart he sank to the ground and pillowed his head on the grassy mound. Moments he had lain prostrate when other thoughts came. His call to the Ministry of Christ; his desire to be a faithful servant; the dependence upon him of hundreds of burdened souls; all rolled in upon his senses as a tempest. Again the life-long struggle and dying triumph of Casper Dwight stirred his memory, and the counsel he himself had given the despairing man arose before him. No tongue could express the awful burden, seething in the heart, and passing on and away, as he thought of the past and reasoned of to-day.

Seemingly he had grown when he stood erect and spoke aloud, his long fingers gripping the palms of the hands till the pink tint came, while over his face a smile of new faith flashed.

"I will not! I will not ask for the blood of John DeLancy!"

CHAPTER XXXVI

IT WORKED TWO WAYS

The session was to hold a meeting at the church on the evening Ralph had planned the surprise on Silas. This made the whole matter very simple.

Allan would be taken to the church, himself already aware of his father's nearness, placed in an adjacent room, and at the proper time revealed.

It took longer than Ralph had bargained for to inform Allan of details he insisted on knowing, and the members of the church body had been waiting some time when Ralph with Allan in tow appeared. Making his charge comfortable close by, Ralph entered the room where the others were, to find Silas talking. So interested were all in what he was saying the Pastor's entrance was scarcely noticed. Silas nodded his head slightly in recognition, as he continued talking.

"Yes, gentlemen, as I was saying, a church that lives up to its duty is a noble institution. I didn't use to think much of it, but experience is a bitter medicine, and it generally cures.

"When we lost our boy, and I started out broken-hearted to hunt for him, I had a feeling every man and woman in the world would be glad to help me, to sympathize with my distress. I hadn't gone far on my way before all such ideas were shattered. Men and women, happy in the presence of their own children around them, in their own cheerful homes, I found had little patience with my woes. Sometimes they would listen in a disinterested way, until I had finished, then, with a curt shrug of

shoulders, turn me from the door; even refusing me, many times, permission to sleep in the barn.

"One day I approached a neat little farm-house, and the door was opened by a woman with a curly-headed boy standing beside her. I was weak and faint anyway from hunger, and men, the sight of that little fellow, so much like mine when he went away, came near keeling me over. I told my story through scalding tears and asked for pity. The woman set the dog on me, while the child clapped his hands in glee. I expect that woman was a highly respected member of society; possibly a leader in some church, but sure as you live, she'll have somewhat to answer for.

"I supposed the police officers of the towns would be kind to me when they heard my story. Some few of them were. I reckon the rest of them thought I was lying to gain some end or other. I have tried to forget their treatment, but I'll tell you, hours spent in filthy jails, and days put in on rock piles, for no more crime than hunting my darling boy, is not conducive of a quick forgettery.

"When a young man I joined a lodge of men, noted for its large membership over the world. I remember yet how the teachings of true brotherhood, and genuine help, stirred my heart. No one was more proud than I, when from the chairs in the lodge-room, I rattled off my part in the ceremony. They were great lessons for any man to know, but utterly worthless unless used.

"In a strange place one night the Lodge sign met my eyes, and by the lights beaming from the room above, I knew a meeting was in progress. I remembered enough to gain admittance at the outer door and then I failed. Years of going had knocked the memory from my brain, and I couldn't pass the examination. I tried to tell them but they wouldn't

listen. Then followed such a thing as I never dreamed of,—my brothers took me to the door and pushed me down the stairs. I fell to the bottom, where a policeman picked me up and took me to jail. I lay in jail three weeks nursing a broken arm, and thinking of Brotherhood as it had been exemplified.

"I don't want you to think all people were like this, for I often ran across a man or women who gladdened my heart, helping to make the long days seem shorter. Such people, however, were not the majority, and neither were they the ones upon whom God had lavished His gifts more abundantly. People who have freely received ought the more freely to give.

"I hate to tell you, gentlemen, how low I did get, and only ask you to remember I could not help it. When I tried to work it seemed the face of my boy kept drawing me on. When I had reached the very depths, there were those who hounded me.

"One day I sneaked into an alley behind a bakery and fished a loaf of bread from a slop barrel. Someone was watching, and I went to the rock-pile. When they turned me loose I went to the country, determined not to enter another town.

"It was then that happened which caused me to give up the search for my boy and sent me toward Blender. How I have prospered here you are all aware, and when I have finished you will all understand what I mean, when you hear me say,—I hope our church will do its duty always.

"In an Iowa country community I found the door of a church-building unlocked, and entering slept the night through in one of the pews. Some one noticed me come out in the morning and while I sat eating my breakfast a crowd of angry farmers gathered. I may have talked a little 'sassy' to

them, goodness knows I had reason to, whereupon they stripped me of my clothes, smearing tar over my body from head to heel. It was an awful task getting rid of the tar, hardly knowing which hurt worse, my skin or my heart. That ended my search—a boy gave me a loaf of bread, God bless him, and I set out on the long road that finally led to Blender. That's the reason I——"

The sentence was never finished. Ralph's face was undergoing such a contortion of changes, all eyes were riveted on him. He choked, sputtered, gasped, and bolting from his chair, advanced to Silas fairly shouting:

"Quick, Silas, let me see your arms!"

Silas undone the wristband of his shirt and bared his right arm to the shoulder, revealing, just above the elbow, the outline of a fish, blue as any indigo, tattooed in his flesh.

"As I thought," Ralph muttered; "I was the boy who gave you the bread!"

All waited, dumfounded by what they heard, and amazed at that seen. None heard the knob at the door turn, nor noted the presence of Allan, until he spoke.

"Father!" There was years of pent up longing in the cry.

Silas arose from his chair, stood one uncertain moment fumbling the back of it, then started forward saying: "Can it be possible? Yes, it is! After all these years! God be thanked! My boy!" Father and son, locked in each other's arms sobbed out their joy.

And the rest? They wept in company.

"I remember, Silas," Ralph said, after the story of Allan was retold, "you well nigh frightened me to death by promising to 'get even.' What did you intend?"

"The raving of a mad man, Mr. Glenwood. I didn't have much faith in God then; I have now. I am willing to call it all even to-night. Everybody and everything is forgiven from my heart,—even the dogs that bit me."

"I'll swow," exclaimed Jim Brown to Mr. Dodd as they parted at the corner, "we didn't do a particle of church business!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

SUNSHINE AND SHADOW

Relief fell as a panacea on heart of father and daughter, when Mr. Dodd and Tommy heard Alvan's exoneration of Alvia from the charge of murder.

Mayhap because she was younger, and more susceptible to feeling, Tommy's happiness appeared to be greater. The neighbors said she had been hurt deeper.

Largely because it was there he met with much needed sympathy, Ralph was a frequent visitor at the Dodd home. Even when she could not help with advice, Tommy's quick power of discernment scented danger for the pastor, when he had no idea of such, and many times steered him safe from hidden breakers.

As developments in a substantial way gladdened the hearts of Blender people, and continued to gladden as weeks grew into months, Tommy knew instinctively something was wrong with Ralph. She was certain the cause of his depression could not be recurring shadows of past troubles. Seriously, she came as near worrying over the matter,—as near as she ever permitted worry to come,—until on one of his visits she asked him the cause.

Ralph handled himself as one would expect an awkward school-boy to do, while answering. Plainly he was in serious doubt of his own conclusion as he spoke.

"I have been thinking for some time, Tommy, my work in Blender is about over. However, I must confess to a lack of good foundation for the

thinking. It may be only a fancy, but fancies sometimes assume the form of realities."

Tommy's silvery laugh as she heard was good to hear; Ralph thought he was helped already. "Your work about over? Is the oxen done when the cart has only reached the steeper slope of the hill?" Again she laughed.

"I know I lack considerable of the time honored patience the oxen possess, but there is something else equally as well honored by time; the idea a minister should not remain on a field too long."

"Yes, I know, some men ought never to enter on a field in the first place—Mr. Dempster for instance. Years can make no difference, only in growth, to the right man in the right place."

"I admit there is a sense in which you are correct."

"It's just like the matter of 'dead line' in men's lives we hear so much about; a dead line runs in any life, just where we permit it, and no other where. Look at old Brother Henderson; eighty years old when he died, and never stopped preaching with his mouth till the breath quit coming; his influence is preaching still. There never was a time when he couldn't draw the largest congregation in the country, simply because he would not let the 'dead line' run with him."

"Yes; but this is a different matter."

"How different? If a preacher is worth anything to a community he ought to stay; if not, he should never come. Once in a while there is opposition springs up; but, barring a few elders, who always had the same idea of religion as a guinea pig, the fault lies with the preacher. The man who stays, even in the face of opposition, will win; and in the end will find it was easier to stay than run."

"It would not be easy for me to run, Tommy."

"Ralph, you are not going to run, you just think you are. With me it is a personal matter, just as it is with hundreds round about. Yes, in a manner such as they do not know. I depend on you, Ralph, oh, so much. All my life I have wanted someone to lean on—father never helped me much until lately, though I am sure he meant to—and then you came. I have leaned upon you in sadness and shame and continued to lean when the clouds began to clear. I suppose it is not so much that way with a man, Ralph; with a woman it is what the trellis is to the rose-vine—she climbs by it or falls without it. I am truly thank'ul God has been so good to me all along the way, but Ralph, it is too much; if—if you go—my support is gone." Tommy was crying softly.

Ralph crossed to her side, taking her hands in his as he spoke. "My dear girl, you have been as much prop to me as I could ever be to you. Do you care so greatly?"

"Yes, Ralph, I have always cared. I cared for your counsel and help, and now I care for only you."

A feeling of delight Ralph had not experienced in months came to him as he gathered Tommy tenderly in his arms and kissed the tear-drops from her eyes. "Could you not guess?" he asked. "I love you, Tommy, and that made the thought of going hard to bear. If I can have you to help I won't go, and where I am there you shall be."

"Oh, Ralph, I am so happy!" He knew her meaning.

With plans for the future in which the two happy hearts joined, hours passed all too quickly. With a start of amazement at the lateness of the hour, Ralph remembered an appointment with the

sheriff at the jail. Reluctantly he arose to go, saying:

"I must go now, dear, but will count the time long till I see you again." Purposely he avoided telling his mission.

The sheriff was pacing his office, not far from the jail, with nervous strides when Ralph arrived. Without the formality of greeting or proffered chair he began.

"The prisoner has signified his desire to make a confession, Mr. Glenwood, and I thought you should hear it. I will go for the prosecuting attorney." Before Ralph could utter a word he was gone. Shrinking from the ordeal, Ralph soon sat in the little room outside the cell, the sheriff on one side of him, while on the other, at a small table, sat the county attorney with pen and paper. Nothing was heard, or would have been heeded if it had, save the low even voice of the prisoner as he told of the crime, and the steady scratch of pen on paper as the attorney wrote.

It was a remarkable story the prisoner told, of a man born to ease and pleasing prospects, choosing to leave all good behind, seeking the sloughs of a lower level. Steeped in sin and crime ere time of manhood arrived, he never knew its meaning. Revolting details of the narration turned the hearers away, sick at heart, "My God!" the sheriff exclaimed at one place as he arose with clenched fist, "can it be you are a man!"

Disclosures in the confession, unnoticed to the other two listeners, impelled Ralph to groan in spirit, and hide his face with his hands. The words burned in his brain with bitter fire, and sent him from the building to his room, unseeing and unhearing.

Far into the night he tossed on a sleepless bed as

again and again his tortured mind recalled.

"I can't; oh, my God! I can't stay in Blender! Tommy must not know! I can never look in her face again!"

Crying thus from the depths of his spirit, toward morning the blessed peace of unconsciousness came.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE TRIAL TO-MORROW

The one topic of conversation, whenever two or more Blender people met together, for weeks before it took place, was the DeLancy trial. Past sensations were all but forgotten in the absorbing interest of the present.

Certain indefinite rumors of a confession on the part of the prisoner, coming from no one knew where, added zest to wagging tongues. The prisoner had few friends among the citizens of Blender. Those few were friendly, through an admirable sympathy for a doomed man, rather than other cause.

On the day before the trial, set for the first day of court, men, with a plentiful sprinkling of women, began to arrive in Blender from distant parts of the country. With impressiveness never to be forgotten, mothers led their children by the hand to unwilling view of the little jail. Animated groups of people with expectant faces and hushed voices, up and down the long street, discussed the events of the morrow with glances ever toward the little house, before the door of which the sheriff stood. Occasionally, but never often, a more bold soul would approach near enough to speak to the officer.

In front of Jim Brown's store a large knot of men listened as the proprietor divided his time between using a big bandanna on his perspiring face and talking. Nods of approval met the sentences as he went on to say.

"I'll tell you, men, 'tis tough luck when a man has to go to court for his life. We don't have any

idea what it means, yet, I dare say, most of us think we do. Most of us have had enough experience with the ol' Harry in our lives to know reasonably well what brings men to such places. I'm not sayin', either, 'tis always the weak sister that stumbles an' falls. Just depends entirely on the provocation.

"Reminds me of our first fire department we organized here in Blender. Most of you remember my brother, John, an' what a fine, manly fellow he was. Well, John thought there was no such thing as failure for him, an' would get mad as a Hottentot if anyone hinted such a thing. John was elected leader of the new fire department, an' the way he set to drillin' the boys done everybody good to watch. You'd 'a' thought he never done anything in his life except to take the kinks out of green hands on a fire team. We didn't have more'n one fire a year in Blender, an' had just got through with one when the apparatus arrived, so John put in a long time waitin' for his chance.

"John had a boy of his own named Sam, an' Sam had a chum he called Guy. The boys heard someone say one day that gasoline would burn off a board an' not set fire to the board. Boy-like they concluded to try it. John kept a five-gallon can of gasoline settin' in the barn, so the boys had no trouble findin' experimental material. Sam poured some oil on the floor while Guy searched his pocket for a match. The board was scarcely blackened. Goin' on the supposition, I suppose, of the more the merrier, Sam poured out a larger quantity, resultin' in some of it goin' through a crack on some loose hay stored below. Gasoline may burn off some things without ignitin', but not hay.

"Then the boys got excited an' kicked over the can, moved somewhat, no doubt, because John was

standin' in the barn door watchin' 'em. He rushed to the street, an' in a few minutes the boys arrived with the fire-fightin' apparatus.

"John instantly forgot the maneuvers of months, an' got as excited as a turkey-buzzard in hayin' time, grabbin' up the hose an' lookin' down the nozzle just as pumpin' commenced. He ended up head-down in a swill-barrel where he would perished had I not rescued him—phew! I remember it yet.

"Ought never turned the fool loose, for no sooner did his feet touch the ground than he rushed for a ladder, a perfectly idiotic thing to do, an' placin' it against the barn climbed to the top, arrivin' just in time to be knocked down by the water from the hose. He landed in a box of whitewash on the back of his neck, an' in less time than it takes to tell it, was chuck full. He sure was a sorry specimen of a leader as he laid there sputterin' an' talkin' rot.

"Whether malice on account of what he said had anything to do with it or not, I can't say, but somehow in shiftin' the hose it was turned full upon John. Only for a minute it was, but plenty long to pile him up in a fence corner where the water followed, tryin' to cram him through a knot-hole. At first he was speechless, then, by degrees, his language became most exasperatin'.

"Pickin' up a small stick of hickory he started for the boys an' never reached 'em. A clothes-line caught him under the chin in a way which came near yankin' his head plum off the diaphragm, turnin' him over backwards into a roll of woven-wire fencin'. How any man could get so outlandishly tangled up goes beyond me, but there he was, his left foot on a surveyin' expedition in the vicinity of his right ear, an' goodness only knows

where he kept the other. After the fire was all out an' everyone gone I turned him loose an' rubbed arnica on the sore spots—only there was some spots arnica couldn't begin to reach.

"John stayed away from town a week, an' when he did finally come down to business he lacked considerable of bein' the same man he was once. It was an awful jolt for a leader to get.

"All kinds of experiences look easy—when we see them happenin' to the other fellow. Each an' severally, the last one of us feels fully competent to take a front seat an' hand out advice on things that never come nearer than forty miles a touchin' top, side nor bottom of our own life. Grief's always easy to get over when the hearse don't stop at our house. Temptation never seems hard to us when the devil's callin' at our neighbor's home.

"I'll tell you, fellow citizens, precious few men but that have hay stored below, an' some day, if they're not careful, fire will get down in the heart an' start somethin'. If there's any more inflammable thing than this same hay, when the tinder boxes of evil are strikin' sparks, then I've just missed, that's all."

"How true it all is," Ralph thought, having arrived in time to hear the closing philosophy tacked onto Jim's story. Those who stood about remarked the preacher didn't look as well as usual.

The judge came in on the evening "Bob" and made his friends happy, while repairing his own fences against next election, without saying so, by holding a reception in the hotel office.

Unheeding of the bustle in the world without, the most disinterested party of all, the prisoner slept in his narrow cell. Little sleep came to others—wrought-up nerves, contemplating the scenes of another day, would not permit. To-morrow, John DeLancy would have his trial.

CHAPTER XXXIX

A CONFESSION

The court-room was far too small to admit all who sought entrance, and fully an hour before the "Oyez! Oyez!" of the court crier awoke the echoes of Main Street, every available inch of space was occupied.

The room in which court met had once been in use as a dry goods store, still being better fit for that purpose. A dozen windows on either side admitted light and air, while a double-door in front and a smaller one in the rear provided entrance to the building.

As each term of court had opened for fifteen years, the judge delivered an unsolicited and unheeded lecture on the folly of not building a courthouse. People heard, smiled, and consistently continued to vote, "No." In crowded seats, or jostled against the wall, many voters were now receiving their first impression of the sore need of public business. Right heartily each one for himself determined to vote "Yes" next time.

Shrill shrieks from a swivel chair, as the judge turned from one side to another, seemed to hurt the spectators somewhere in the near region of the teeth. Sincerely they wished he would sit still, and one bold farmer suggested to a court officer, who appeared to be engaged in nothing heavier than revolving his thumbs, that he oil the bearings. Amid feeble applause, checked in its incipency by a look of disapproval from His Honor, the feat was accomplished.

The judge was a man of probably fifty years,

having the appearance of forty. When the fortunes of politics found him he was a struggling lawyer, not long out of school, his livelihood dependent more upon odd jobs at farming than on law practice. On the bench he had demeaned himself in such a way that credit and honor were universally accorded him. That his rulings in criminal cases were always strict, the people knew; and now, as they waited, no one expected mercy for DeLancy, except as the evidence strictly warranted.

Amid a general shuffling of feet and benches, and raising of heads the sheriff led his prisoner to a place before the judge. Then followed a long colloquy, in a subdued tone, between the judge and prosecuting attorney, with everyone in the room wishing he knew what they were talking about. Presently the judge leaned forward in his chair and, addressing the special venire of men drawn for jury service, said: "Gentlemen, you will not be needed." Fixing his gaze upon the luckless man before him the command came with the sharpness of a gun-shot: "Prisoner at the bar, stand up!"

Assisting himself with the chair DeLancy arose and stood trembling.

"Are you guilty or not guilty as charged?"

"I am guilty, your Honor!"

"Have you anything to say by way of extenuation before sentence is passed on you?"

The prisoner wavered a moment, about to fall, then, with a shrug of resolution, walked nearer the judge. His voice as he spoke rang to every portion of the large room.

"Your Honor, whatever punishment I receive is well deserved and I have nothing to say against it. I only ask to tell my story that perhaps other men may profit by it."

"Go on," commanded the judge.

"I was born, your Honor, in Giles County, Tennessee, not far from Brick Church, of well-to-do and God-fearing parents. I can hardly remember a time when I wasn't mean through choice. The preachers who came to the mountains moved the hearts of everyone except myself; I sat and mocked their tearful entreaties spoken to me.

"Many a time, judge, when I wasn't more than thirteen or fourteen years old, I stood outside the window of our log home and sneered while my father with trembling hands drew the lamp nearer to read his Bible, and mother knelt in prayer for her boy. One day while mother pleaded with me I struck her saintly face with my clenched fist, knocking her to the floor. With tears my father told me I must do better or leave—I went to the hills. Time was spent in gambling, stealing and drunken debauchery, till whatever conscience I had, never very much, was entirely gone. One night, in a drunken row, I stabbed a man to death with a knife.

"Father and his friends came to my assistance, and the judge let off on proof of self-defense. My father insisted I was no longer a son of his and with my own eyes I saw my name cut away from the rest in the old Bible. I couldn't blame him then, after all he had tried to do for me—I don't blame him now. From that day to this my name has been DeLancy. My father's name was DeLane.

"I went what was called far away, to the mountains in the east, and have never since looked on the faces of my people. There in the simple home of a mountaineer I found welcome, the sweetest part of all the friendship coming from a daughter of the home. She wasn't what most people would choose as a beauty, but a more simple, trusting,

loving nature would be hard to find. I won her, and, in the prettiest little valley in the world, we set up our home. We thought we were in bliss that first year, only we didn't know the meaning of it. When baby came the woods had never seemed so pretty; the birds never sang so sweetly; the water of the Nollichucky River had never before made such music. It didn't last long, judge. The baby died!

"I tried to be a man. My poor wife—it hurt her worse than me. Drink came again, robbing my heart of all the built-up feeling it possessed. I kicked, abused and beat with my fist the little woman clinging to me and crying.

"Honest, judge, I never thought of pushing her so far, surprised that one morning she was gone. All day I searched for her and just as the sun was sinking into rest I found her body in the Nollchucky—the beautiful river she had so much loved—her long hair covering the peaceful face. God help me, I drove her to it!

"I ran away; far away to my home west of here. Experience done me some good, I reckon, because most of the time since coming I have done better. When Oliver Dodd first came I borrowed some money of him, and we had a dispute about interest. I have no idea Mr. Dodd remembered the matter over night; the very demon in me was aroused, urging me to get even. With Alvia's downfall, knowing just how to lead him on, I had much to do—rejoicing when the completeness of his ruin was plain.

"When Alvia got away from the jail here in Blender, by a round-about way, he reached my house. Just why I hid him away I don't know; certainly not through love, nor because I cared what become of him. It was there I heard of his

affection for Alice Dwight, and all in connection with it. The ease with which I could commit the crime, certain it would be laid at Alvia's door, appealed to me. The malice of my heart toward Oliver Dodd, seeking to wreck his life through the shame of his son, drove me to take the life of the innocent girl.

"Afraid to let him get out of my sight, I kept Alvia in hiding for weeks. At last he guessed my secret, accusing me, and threatening to go to the officers. My sin-cursed soul had another crime to answer for when I poisoned him, hauling the cold body to Honey Creek, where it was found. The stick of wood gave me away—I would have sworn it was burned up—but it is just as well.

"Hate nursed in my heart has led me where I am. I don't know whether God will forgive a miserable wretch like me or not, never having cared to know much of such things. Ready to receive my sentence, I am deserving of no mercy and ask none."

So silent was the room when the revolting recital closed, the tick of the large clock, on the wall over the judge's chair, could be distinctly heard. Without knowing any good reason for so doing every eye in the room turned toward the place where Ralph Glenwood sat. Noting the fact, and realizing he was doing an unusual thing, the judge spoke.

"Mr. Glenwood, have you anything to say?"

Arising from his place with face ashy pale Ralph addressed the judge. "Your Honor," he said, "some things in the confession you have heard, are even more revolting to me than the crimes themselves. The murderer is of the same blood as myself. The son of my mother's brother—my cousin. Be as

merciful as you can; and may God have greater mercy!"

Hardly realizing how he reached it Ralph was grateful for the cooler air outside; thankful, too, he need not hear the sentence, as it fell with firm accent from the resolute lips of the judge:

"Under all the circumstances it would be far too merciful an act to take your life. In order the past may harass your soul, possibly to make a better man of you, it shall not be so. The Court decrees, John DeLancy, that you shall be confined for ninety-nine years, or so long as you may live, in the penitentiary at Jefferson City."

CHAPTER XL

IN ALLAN'S CAVE

Nothing more was needed than the bare mention of the changed name, and location, to recall to Ralph's memory the one shadow over the life of his mother. As a boy then, he paid little attention to the story of his wayward cousin, many years older than himself. The unexpectedness of the whole matter left him in a poor condition to think calmly. Nothing save the disgrace presented itself to perverted thought, and so continued. To his sensitive view, every man on the street was talking about him, while from every window a finger pointed.

As could be readily conjectured, his view was wrong in its entirety. Not a single individual, in town or country, but that sympathized with the pastor, feeling drawn even closer to him as a result of what they had seen and heard.

Much depressed in spirit, while debating in mind the idea of leaving Blender at once, a debate in which Tommy's face played a prominent part, Ralph set out in the twilight of evening for a long walk. By way of unpeopled paths his steps led on and on, until he stood under the familiar tree beneath which the water played—Allan's tree. Above, the open mouth of the great cave yawned, only half revealed in the growing night.

He had stood for considerable time, charmed by the voices of the water, wondering what his friend would make of them now, when he became aware of footsteps and a voice, saying:

"Is it you, Mr. Glenwood?" The voice was that of Allan.

"Yes," Ralph answered. "You come back occasionally for a look at old haunts, do you?"

"I can't keep away. I was talking with a man yesterday who told me how, when the old homestead was sold, he walked all over the place, visiting every nook and place, every tree and fence-corner, saying good-bye. I feel a good deal like that about the cave, the only home I had so long. Then, too, the night appeals to me; nature—I guess that's it—'tis hard to get over. I've wanted to show you my old home. Will you go now?"

Ralph signified his willingness to go and Allan led the way up the hill, on past the opening known to people generally. Turning to the left down a steep incline he came to a dense growth of scrub-oaks into which he made way, and stood beside what appeared to be an abandoned well. Below trickling water could be heard. "Be careful where you put your feet. Come on." Allan swung over the edge as he spoke, disappearing below.

Feeling about with hands and feet Ralph found a ladder of grapevine upon which he cautiously descended to a depth, he estimated, of fifteen feet. It appeared they were simply standing on the bottom of a well.

With the information he made them himself, of material gathered where he could, Allan produced candles, handing one to Ralph and retaining the other.

"I could go as well without," he said, "but you couldn't. You are the first visitor I've ever had."

The lighted candles revealed an opening, a hole in the ground, barely large enough to admit a man's body, into which Allan went, directing his visitor to follow. Crawling some distance they came to an

opening where the two could stand erect, side by side. Holding his candle ahead of him, Allan started along the corridor, Ralph following. The sound of water continued, still beneath and beyond them. After walking perhaps a mile, over ground that left an impression of winding, and a gentle slope, they suddenly stood in a vast opening, the limits of which could not be told by feeble candle-light.

"This was my home," Allan announced.

Thoroughly impressed by the security of the place, Ralph said: "Certainly you were safe from bother here. How far down in the ground are we?"

"I have never been able to tell. I guess it's plenty deep enough. We come down hill all the way."

Ralph started ahead, inspecting the room as he went, when a sharp cry from Allan brought him to a halt, inquiring, "What's the matter?"

"Don't go that way, Brother; don't you hear the water? That's the great hole between the two caves. Nobody knows how deep it is."

"I am not sure it would matter much should I jump off!" Ralph laughed uneasily as he spoke.

Catching the sleeve of his friend, Allan pushed him gently backward as he asked: "What's wrong with you, Brother? Come, have a seat on one of my rock chairs while we talk it over."

In the dark place, the darkness beyond intensified by the candles near, Ralph poured his whole story into eager ears. Allan spoke no word as the telling progressed to a finish, ending with the determination to leave Blender to-morrow.

"Is that all?" he asked, when Ralph's silence hinted as much.

"Is that all? Isn't that enough?"

"Just depends on your purpose, Brother. Let's see if I've got it right. John DeLancy, the self-confessed four-times murderer, turns out to be

rather a close relative of yours, hence, you feel disgraced. You feel so keenly the shame of the thing that, because some of the same blood that flows in your veins happens to run in his, you are called on to run. Do I get it right?"

"Yes, those are about the facts."

"Brother, you're right smart the biggest rabbit I've seen lately, for allowing the sin of any mortal that walks the earth unhung to chase you out of God's vineyard. I used to be afraid of sin in other men—was so for years, but, Brother, I wasn't right in my head. If you've got my trouble you're welcome to the cave.

"If everybody who ever had mean relation should start to run away, this old world would be the rip-roarinest hurly-burly stars ever looked down on. Invalids and weak folks wouldn't stand much show. Most of us would be surprised to know how many ancestors of ours were justly hung, and how many should been that never were.

"Ah, Brother, many a good wife has a husband in the gutter, and full many a good husband has a wife in the street. To be a brother's keeper does not mean to dodge the police when he steals, nor fly the country when he murders. The only sins we'll ever be called on to answer for, will be those planned under our own skin, and worked out in our own lives.

"So far as the people are concerned, you'll find them sorry for the poor fellow that fell, with no other idea of it. Only for a passing moment did they notice he was of your family—the ripple you are expecting to wash away the bulwarks of your labors exists only in your own mind.

"You say you love Tommy, and I know you do. How did she behave under conditions that reached closer to her than this does you? Did she run away?"

I don't want to hurt your feelings, Brother—you've done too much for me—but if you insist on doing what you have threatened, I must say, if I needed a man right bad, I'd pass you over and take Tommy."

Ralph sat in silence a moment when Allan had finished, then, with deep emotion, said: "I know, Allan, there is truth in what you say, only I just can't. Oh, I wish I could!"

"Then Allan can fulfil one good purpose in coming back from the dead, if he never does another. I now do so, when I tell you—Ralph Glenwood—you are a coward!" Then in a softer voice he spoke: "Come, Brother, let us go."

CHAPTER XLI

RALPH FINDS HIMSELF

Situated three hundred feet above the beautiful winding White River the Hollister Assembly Grounds command a splendid view of wild Ozark scenery. It is doubtful in all the state a more enchanting spot could be found to city and country folks alike.

When the committee on location came to this spot the matter was all settled at once. A testimony to the wisdom of the committee, as well as the appealing charms of the place, lay in the fact that now, in its third year, fully four hundred people had gathered on the ground.

Only one thing—many twisted tongues insisted on calling them “chicks and tiggers,” meaning ticks and chiggers—detracted from the pleasure. Even these wild things were now growing scarcer, and only the fervent gesture of some speaker, as he dug into his anatomy after one, served to remind of them.

Physical improvements on the ground were numerous and pleasing, chief among them being an ample pavilion for meeting purposes, and a commodious dining-hall with kitchen attached. Then the water tower. As one man said of it: “The water tower is a thing of beauty and when some leaks in it have been thoroughly repaired, it will be a joy forever.”

From the top of this tower, reached by a ladder built in its side, a circular view could be had so far as the rise of great hills permitted. A view of valleys, trees, and winding roads on the hillsides,

while far below lay the little towns, Branson and Hollister, and the river. Never to be forgotten was the view from the rail-guarded tower.

Long streets of comfortable tents provided homes for the visitors. Though many plans were in process of forming, not many cottages had been built as yet.

It was to these surroundings Ralph hastened when he ran away from Blender, his view of that place, from the car window as he went, considered his last one. As he left the train at Branson, crossed the river by way of the ferry, and trudged up the long slope to the grounds, his chief regret was that he had not said good-bye to Tommy. A regret softened in some degree by the idea of an immediate letter, telling her all about it.

Ralph found no strangers assembled on the hill, though he had never before met more than three of the number. An elderly gentleman standing near the pavilion reached out his hand, without formality of introduction, and began. "Remarkable thing there are no flies here; we have eaten four times, the dining-hall open all around; not a single fly buzzing about; not a single screen to keep them out. 'Twould seem more home-like to see a fly in the coffee occasionally. We men like to carry our troubles along with us."

Ralph made some kind of a reply, failing to impress the old man, and the conversation ended.

The speaker of the afternoon was an old man with feeble step and whitened head. All of seventy years, Ralph thought, as he walked forward on the platform. Not more than a dozen words had fallen on his ears before the runaway preacher was searching the past, certain he had before heard such a voice. The search ended at Rock River Association, and he knew he was again listening to the preacher

of that well-recalled evening—the same voice he later heard in the hay-loft.

Out of his long experience the man spoke, telling of victory and defeat, of pleasure and sorrow. Rapt attention was paid him as he spoke, growing more intense as he drew to a conclusion. "I am glad to stand before you to-day in upholding the banner of Christ. Many times I have been tempted to run away when the conflict seemed fierce; how glad I am to-day I never did, tongue cannot tell. There is only one good excuse for running, time has told me; that is, if one is in the road of good works he should clear out. Some men are more of a disturbance than a help, always."

Going as one in a dream Ralph made his way from the pavilion to his tent. The handshaking amid loud acclaim, left behind, did not appeal to his distressed mind. "I declare," he thought, as in a camp-chair he threw himself, "that makes two come back from the dead to tell me I am a coward. How is a fellow to get around what he just naturally can't help?"

For three hours the silence in the tent was unbroken, only for the now and then rustle of paper, as he poured out his heart to Tommy in writing.

Safely, in a bulky, addressed envelope, the letter reposed in his pocket as he arose.

The sun had gone down behind the hills, leaving a wealth of color behind on the horizon, when he yielded to impulse, as almost every visitor does, and climbed the tower. To see from there is well worth the effort.

Standing alone, her face toward the varied colored glow in the West, her hands clasped tight in ecstasy, was Tommy. Unnoticed the scene about him, his presence unknown to her, Ralph stood several happy moments, watching the light

and shadow cross her face. Softly he spoke her name.

With a glad little cry she turned toward him.

"I am so glad, Ralph, you are here! I was just thinking how much prettier it would all seem, if you could look with me!"

"Tommy, can you ever forgive me?" He was close beside her as he spoke.

"I didn't know there was aught to forgive."

"Yes, darling, but there is. I was running away from Blender and you. The same kind of a struggle you once endured, and prevailed over, came near conquering me. My search really began in Allan's cave, beneath the earth, and I have only now found myself, on the tower, above the same earth."

"Toward God is always a good place to find one's self, Ralph, even if the start is from the ground."

"I am anxious to get back to Blender; strange it never struck me so before, the Father's business requires haste. I must show the people."

Oblivious of the fact a dozen pairs of eyes watched, he bent and kissed her cheek.

CHAPTER XLII

“ ’T WAS ALL A LIE ”

In the early morning Ralph and Tommy were hardly comfortably seated on a train for home when a loud commotion at the coach door attracted their attention. From out a confused mass of men and women, the feet, then the arms of a man protruded, and directly Jim Brown stood blinking in the aisle.

“Why, it’s Jim Brown!” both spoke at once, as Jim advanced, throwing the back of a seat over and sitting down, faced them.

“Yes, it’s Jim Brown. You notice I’m here, notwithstanding they said I couldn’t get on without a ticket. I looked for you all over the grounds, wakin’ up more’n half the people, I guess, then some fellow told me you had gone to the train. I’ve come to tell you, ’twas all a lie!”

For miles, as the train sped toward Blender, Jim talked on in his own way refusing to answer any and all questions. Never for a moment did he cease until he was all finished, except through the long tunnel at Reeds’ Spring, where smoke from the engine choked utterance.

“Some men are just naturally born liars, same as others are with red hair or long noses—they can’t help it. Jap Timbrell was one of them kind. Accordin’ to his own account, mind you, Jap went out to western Kansas when wolves were thicker’n hair on a dog’s back. If they got a fellow out after night they was most sure to get him, ’cause there wasn’t a tree of any kind any place. He was at work in the field one day, five miles from home,

an' darkness caught him 'bout half way back. The cry of wolves came in the rear. Just as they were upon him, in another minute would had him down, he reached the lower branch of a tree an' swung up. He was safe, but in a decidedly unpleasant position, three miles from home, up a tree, no gun, an' surrounded by ravenous wolves.

"All at once he happened to think music would charm the savage beast, an' swingin' his ol' fiddle aroun' began to play. He sawed away for an hour, an' when he quit, twenty-four wolves lay dead on the ground. Danced to death.

"Jap went up to Wisconsin where he said Winter was so cold the talk froze up, an' made 'em sleep in the woods most all Summer, 'cause when the talk thawed out, it made so much disturbance they couldn't sleep in the house.

"It was there he got acquainted with a man by the name of Sanders, an' his cow. Sanders had a cow that wouldn't stand still at milkin' time, so he fixed up an attachment to milk anyway. The attachment consisted of a seat, back an' foot-rest, an' a place to set the bucket. His wife would attract the cow's attention until Sanders was seated, then there would be a time. Jap said it was the one great sight of his life, to see the cow goin' across the field like a cyclone, with ol' Sanders sittin' there milkin' away.

"I really ought to apologize to Jap's memory for luggin' him in with John DeLancy. He was a liar, poor fellow, but he never meant to harm anyone by it.

"Ralph, that fellow DeLancy confessed again yesterday, an' this time he says that part of his story about his father's name bein' DeLane was all a lie, thrown in for effect. He knew some facts about the matter, so made them fit his story. The

judge says, if he could, he'd hang him yet, for lyin'.

"The sheriff sent a telegram to Giles County, an' the reply said, John DeLane was killed in a saw-mill, on the Nollichucky River, eighteen years ago, an' buried there."

Ralph could hardly credit his sense of hearing as the words fell on his understanding. "Certainly it is a remarkable story," he said, "yet it is most welcome to me."

Then he turned to Tommy. "And I was running away from a lie." His voice was deeply serious as he spoke.

Allan was the first to greet them on the depot platform at Blender. In a low voice, intended only for Ralph, he said, as they walked along, "I am glad, Brother, you wasn't a coward."

The expression on the face of Ralph was not that of one who feels deserving of praise.

CHAPTER XLIII

ON THE MOON-LIT SLOPE

Ralph spent the entire day of his return in the study room at the church. Possibly never before in his life had he felt so free to work. Time and again, he told himself, it was like getting out of prison, the relief he now knew.

Along in the evening Allan made his way to the study door, entering unannounced, seating himself resolutely in a chair. "I have come to talk," he stated blandly.

Ralph pushed aside the material before him and turned about encouragingly as he heard.

"I want to talk about myself. When a fellow at the age of six years, or thereabouts, goes out of the world, and then steps back in again, a man, its no easy matter to take hold. It strikes me the old world is not aching much, anyway, for me to take part in it."

The only strange thing about Allan's statement to the hearer was, it had not come sooner; right well he knew it was bound to come. When he spoke, the words were not the invention of a moment.

"I don't see, Allan, that you are much worse off than lots of people who have been living all the time. Life as a school-term of preparation for another, and better one to come, has entirely missed their calculation. They resent in anger any kindly counsel in the matter. There is a vast difference in an unprogressive life, and merely being dead, with the advantage wholly with the latter. You have been in contact with a world that does not

sin; the only sin you could find came from without. Your experience fits you in a peculiar way to preach for men; to teach them, properly understood, the very land on which they live, horses in stalls, cattle in stanchions, hogs in pens and sheep in pastures, all plead by example for holy living. Allan, you must preach God's gospel in simple things."

"Yes, Brother, I feel it here," placing his hands over the heart. "God has always talked to me; I find he talks yet. But I have always been afraid of wrong; no less so now. How can I?"

"God's spokesman ought always to be frightened at sin or wrong—that's not a drawback. The man who sees sin in all its consequences is not apt to sleep on duty in its presence. There is a vast gulf of distance between knowing sin, and seeing it. The man who knows is eager to hug it up. As to the how, if you will, you can be my assistant. I will teach you some things while I learn from you. Will you do it?"

"Yes, Brother, God helping me, I will!"

It was thus the Blender congregation secured an assistant pastor. Jim Brown was authority for the statement some months after: "The people around Blender were not nearly so tough as Dives' Brothers, else Allan was a better preacher than Lazarus, 'cause people did believe when one from the dead told them."

That Fall and Winter more than four hundred men and women were added to the church. Allan said it was Ralph, while he passed the credit to Allan, the hearts of both certain it was God, manifest in right teaching.

On the night announcement of Allan's acceptance of his call was made, the largest prayer-meeting audience Blender had ever witnessed was present. "God is Love" was the theme, and for three hours,

that seemed no more than half of one, testimony after testimony went out from thankful hearts.

Near a great white stone on the church-yard slope, after the lights were out, a man and woman paused.

"The moon will come up over Hunter Hill in a moment, Tommy; let us sit and watch it." The man sat down as he spoke, drawing Tommy beside him.

Her head pillowed on his shoulder, his arm tenderly about her, they sat till the rising light of night crossed the hills, flooding all the valley below.

"Oh, Ralph," Tommy spoke, "it seems like life has plenty of beauty after all, doesn't it?"

"Yes," he drew her closer, "if we look for it."

Silas Warner, belated, stopped a moment in passing, remarked the splendid scene of the night.

With a wave of the hand toward the church, the white stones of the cemetery showing beyond, Ralph responded: "Mr. Warner, there is something about it all that makes me think, 'tis an echo of Union Chapel."

"The first time in my life, Mr. Glenwood, I ever noticed an echo better than the substance from which it sprang."

Far away to the North, a huge walnut tree swayed its branches under the moon the watchers looked on, the great spirit of the night sighing through the branches.

CHAPTER XLIV

FIVE YEARS AFTER

One Autumn, Johnson Saintclair, long since retired from active service, came back over old Missouri trails. Here and there he wandered, till the declining sun of one Saturday found him taking the hand of Silas Warner in greeting.

"You don't look much older than when I last met you, Mr. Warner." The hand-clasp was hearty.

"I may not look much older, yet I am. My shortened breath and failing eyes, if nothing else, tell me so. Then, things have happened." A wan smile spread over the wrinkled face.

Even as they spoke there came an explosive boom, reverberating among the hills as distant thunder.

"What is that?" the visitor asked.

"That?" echoed Silas. "That is in the mines. The last shots of the week. No more will be done until Monday comes."

"What! You mean to say the mines quit work over Sunday?"

"Precisely."

"I have lived to be an old man, and never expected to see such a thing. The usual thing is to do more on Sunday, if any difference. It's a failing in mining towns."

"We do not do things in the usual way here. We have all other people have, and more. Our five thousand people are happy."

"You have plenty of churches, I judge."

"All we need; we have one."

"One church to look after this town and the country about? Remarkable!"

"Just one, and it does the task well. We have not felt the need of another. Less than a dozen men, within reach, remain out of the organization."

"And does Mr. Dodd still live?"

"Yes. We'd hardly know how to get along without him. He puts in as much time with the church now as he used to with his bank. Since Alvia died——"

"Oh, yes! His boy. So he died?"

"He had been murdered, and his body thrown in the creek. Poor fellow, we blamed him for more than he ever done! When we look back now it's easy to see we didn't all do our duty by the lad. Some few did, and it makes the condemnation of the rest all the more bitter. I tell you, Mister, you simply can't get around the fact, man touches man along the journey of life, and it's a touch for good or evil. Had we all stood behind Alvia at one time and helped, no doubt it could have been different.

"We learned our lesson. For nearly five years our jail has not held a single prisoner. In fact, the old thing's rotted down, and we don't expect to build a new one. Whenever one of our people shows an inclination to go wrong the whole church simply stands to his back—and man, he can't."

"Not long since an unfortunate girl, deserted by the author of her ruin, came into our town. You know how people have usually handled such ones; kicked them to the depths. Well, sir, Tommy Glenwood, bless her soul, and the strong women of the church, got their arms beneath that girl. To-day, purged of sin, saved to society, she is useful. The church has solved our problems, and we just natural couldn't help solving the problems of the church in return.'

"Mr. Dwight, what of him?"

"He sleeps on the hill. Before he went all was made right between him and Mr. Dodd. It was the start of great things for all of us."

"Who is the preacher?"

"See that white house on the hill yonder? He lives there."

Just then a group of laughing children passed the door. "See that little one, the one with the red cap and black hair? Well, she's theirs. Looks just like her mother. They call her Alice."

Then Silas told all the story, a part of which I have written.

THE END

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taken from the Building**

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